

ALBERTA  
AND THE OTHERS

MADGE S. SMITH

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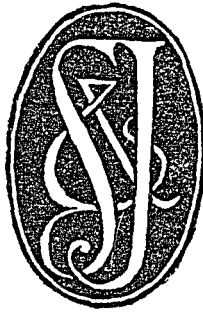
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# ALBERTA AND THE OTHERS

A TRUTHFUL STORY OF WESTERN CANADA

BY

MADGE S. SMITH



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TO  
MY MOTHER  
IN REMEMBRANCE OF  
A SOJOURN IN THE WEST

# ALBERTA AND THE OTHERS

## CHAPTER I

### A WESTERN HEIRESS

"You *won't* like it, Alberta," said the Captain.

He stood on the shabby hearth-rug, with his back to a bright wood fire that was not out of place even on a May afternoon, and looked regretfully about him at the homely, rather untidy little room, with its familiar air of being lived in every day by a varied assortment of young and energetic people.

The tea-things had not been cleared away, and more than one saucer contained cigarette-ashes. Out of a half-closed drawer dangled the feet of several stockings; a printing-frame was balanced in the window to catch the last of the day; and books and papers had overflowed the table-tops and encroached on the seats of chairs.

In all this cheerful disorder signs of a neat and methodical spirit were not lacking, as evidenced by a smoker's cabinet quite full of sewing materials, and

a pen-rack on the writing-table, where the family appeared to store old golf-balls.

There was also a newspaper-rack which held slippers, and a little bracket on the wall, bulging with clock-wheels, said "Spent Matches" reproachfully.

The Captain emptied a cat and the sleeve of a blouse out of a chair, looked anxiously for the needle, and sat down heavily, like a man who feels himself weighty with disapproval.

"I'm sure we shall like it," said Alberta. There was a trace of defiance in her voice. "We shall never have such a chance again."

"What to do, pray?"

"To get out of the groove, for one thing." Alberta's eyes were very bright. "And—oh, to see life—and travel——"

"And you won't like it," repeated the Captain aggravatingly.

Good advice, especially when urged upon one in opposition to a cherished wish, *is* aggravating. A very astute man might have seen that he was only adding fuel to flame; but Kingsway was not particularly astute; he was only hurt and sore and unhappy.

"Think it over, Alberta. Do try to realise what life out there will mean to you! I've been. I've seen it. No society, no friends, no 'fun.' Nothing to do out of doors. None of your pleasures, no visiting, no parties——"

"We don't have much society here, I'm sure," said Alberta ruthlessly. "And as for friends, who is there? Besides, we are not going into the wilderness. Uncle Richard's town-lots are in a big town, one of the most progressive cities of the West. Gerald measured

up the plan that the lawyer sent, and it shows that the town is twice as big as this dead-alive old place."

She glanced disapprovingly out of the window, down the steep High Street with its grey old church and its new Carnegie library, and the little bustle round the station steps where the milk-floats were drawn up for the evening train.

"Look at it," said Alberta. "What is there in that?"

"Yes, look at it," answered Kingsway hotly. "Before you've been in Sunshine a month you'll be ready to give your ears for a look at it. There's the station. It's really quite nice, you know, to be able to take a train to a hundred and one different points when you want a change. Milk-floats, too—in Sunshine you'll probably have to live on canned milk——"

"I hate milk in any case," said Alberta.

"Then there's the church where you've gone ever since you can remember—where you can't go but you see scores of people who have known you all your lives—people who knew your parents—and who care for you——"

"But that's just it!" broke in Alberta. "We want to see some *new* people. Who cares about having all their friends ready made?"

Captain Kingsway winced, but the light was failing, and Alberta was not watching the effect of her words.

"As for Society, we can't afford to go to the bits of parties there are, even in Craven Bridge. And there seems to be plenty of gaiety in Sunshine, if I cared for

that kind of thing. But I don't. You *know* I don't! I want to get out into the open, and lead a freer life. It's wider and less constrained in every way."

"How do *you* know?" snapped the Captain.

"Also," continued Alberta, "I'm not thinking of myself only, as you seem to imply. There are the others. If you had to engineer careers for brothers, and the girls' educations to get out of the little income there is to do it with, you'd see as I do, perhaps."

"But Gerald is older than you," objected the Captain. "And then your Aunt Mary——"

"Gerald is only a year older than I, and he always takes my advice. As for Aunt Mary—well, you know what *she* is in the matter of business. Her one idea is to find some antiquated old foggy or other, the older the better, to run to for advice in every predicament."

"She generally comes to *me*," remarked the Captain grimly. Alberta ignored the interruption.

"There are all kinds of openings out there, you know," she said. "A man can work with his hands and be thought no worse of. There are all kinds of ways in which a girl of grit can make money."

"Your aunt will find the climate a little trying, don't you think?"

"Oh no, that's quite wrong," replied Alberta readily. "We shouldn't dream of taking her to a cold place, of course. Where we're going, the weather isn't a bit severe. The snow has hardly fallen when some curious wind—I forget what they call it—comes and melts it all away. You don't even need to wear furs, and you can leave cattle out in the fields all the winter, too. You can have this little book. Gerald got two



copies from the Emigration Office. It tells you all about the climate, and there are pictures."

"No thank you! Your graphic description makes the book quite superfluous!"

"You know," Alberta said appealingly, dropping the defiant attitude and turning nice, enthusiastic grey eyes on the Captain's cross face,—“you know, my *name's* Alberta! How can I help wanting to go there? And it's such a big, new, wonderful country!"

"And you are such a young, inexperienced lot of youngsters! Have you thought how poor Aunt Mary is going to keep warm in winter? Even your gospel here admits that the temperature does sometimes fall to thirty below."

"Yes, and if you read on, you'll see that you don't *feel* the cold on account of the altitude. And, of course, in severe weather, she wouldn't go out. The houses are warmed, it says."

Kingsway glanced at the fire.

"Listen! 'By means of the most modern system of hot-air shafts, rooms may be maintained at an even temperature winter and summer alike at a minimum expenditure.' There's a lot more about the climate. It's awfully interesting. This is the *Sunshine Clarion Publicity Number*, which the lawyer sent. See, here's a picture of one of the houses. That will give you an idea of the sort of thing."

"Did you ever reflect what a nice photograph your hen-house would make?" asked the Captain, à propos of nothing.

"Oh, and you can get over fifty cents a dozen for fresh eggs nearly all the year round. There'd be

some profit about keeping hens there! And half a dollar—that's more than two shillings, you know—a pound for table-fowls."

"Very nice, I'm sure! Alberta, I do implore you not to be so silly!"

Kingsway grabbed his cap, and took his leave abruptly. Alberta watched his departing figure from the window with some bewilderment. There was indignation and disapproval in every line of his back.

"How ridiculously conservative one's elders are!" she reflected. "I think he must be in love with Aunt Mary. He seems quite upset."

She picked up the *Publicity Number*, which he had thrown on the floor, and folded it carefully.

"Aunt Mary will have to look at that. Thank goodness, *she* will be easy enough to manage—provided, that is, that she doesn't let *him* lead her by the nose."

She returned to the task which Captain Kingsway's call had interrupted, of totting up the list of expenses entailed by the big step that lay ahead of the adventurous family. It was a fascinating, if somewhat alarming calculation. A month ago, Alberta would have carefully considered the expenditure of as many pence, almost, as the pounds she was now methodically turning into dollars.

It was Uncle Richard's legacy that had wrought this change in her. For the second time this roving uncle—her mother's elder brother, and one time *mauvais sujet*—had flitted across her life.

The first time, before Alberta was of an age to appreciate the honour done her, Uncle Richard had

arrived home on a fleeting visit from his ranch in Western Canada, and being just in time for the christening, had insisted upon bestowing upon his little god-daughter a pretty name and a haunting suggestion.

Alberta West! Such was the conjunction of the breezy gentleman's choice, and possibly he dreamed, for in those days he was young and hopeful, that he would make his sister's baby-girl a Western heiress indeed.

Alberta had day-dreamed vaguely as a little girl—dreams in which she figured delightfully as a cow-girl heroine, modelled on primitive impressions from discursive reading—but she had never thought seriously of her uncle's generous intentions.

The intentions, be it said, were genuine enough, though no one ever counted on them very much. Alberta was three-and-twenty when the mountain heaved and brought forth a mouse. That is to say, poor, harmless, procrastinating Uncle Richard, who had not written home for ten years, died suddenly, and Alberta, his niece and god-daughter, was the poorer for an uncle she had never seen to remember, and the richer for an estate represented by—two town-lots in the City of Sunshine.

If she had been expecting a fortune, she might have been disappointed. As it was, she was very much surprised and very much pleased. She tried to be grieved at Uncle Richard's death, failed to realise any very genuine regret, and became deeply interested in the Dominion of Canada, the Province of Alberta, and the City of Sunshine.

Fully to realise and enjoy the pleasant position of

being a landed proprietor, one must first see one's property ; that, at least, was Alberta's conviction, in which the rest of the family heartily concurred. The suggestion that the property might be sold was scornfully vetoed.

"Uncle Richard meant these town-lots to be the nucleus of a fortune," said Alberta. "It would be a slight to his memory not to develop them. Besides the opportunity we should be missing."

Her brother Gerald, who was qualifying to become an architect by slow degrees, kindly offered to go in person to inspect the property, with a view to building on the lots. He also wished to study conditions in the architectural business in that country, as he had heard that the West offered good openings for that overcrowded profession.

Then it turned out that Robin also could make a trip across Canada very profitable in his line of business, which was connected with a photographic firm.

Alberta said that she might even make it convenient herself to inspect her new estate, and repeated the opinion of a globe-trotting acquaintance, "that it was no more expensive to travel than to stop at home."

"Quite out of the question for you to go alone," said both her brothers at once. "It wouldn't be proper. And then, how much wiser would you be when you did see it ? "

If Aunt Mary had been there, at that first discussion, that first manifestation of the Spirit of Unrest, if she had only been there to query one or two of Alberta's firm utterances, only to suggest that the

expedition would cost as much as the land was worth, who knows how early a death might have overtaken this zeal for Empire-building.

Aunt Mary kept house for the young Wests. She was a small, slim old lady, of deprecatory manner, and timid and hesitating of speech. There were times, however, when she did express herself with decision and clarity. But Aunt Mary was just then enjoying a much-needed vacation from her self-appointed task of keeping house for the bear-garden at Tollbar Cottage, and the decision of the family council was conveyed to her, in an astounding letter from Alberta, as a matter already as good as accomplished, and indeed only requiring from her the housewifely assistance of packing up.

The magnitude of the proposal was almost stunning, but she started for home without further delay.

"The dear children are going to Canada next month," she explained, in much the same tone in which she might have spoken of a premeditated trip to Colwyn Bay. "I don't know how I am to get their things ready in time."

She never seriously considered the idea of opposing the scheme. "Alberta is so headstrong, and she never listens to me," she sighed. "These young people are a terrible responsibility. I only hope and pray it may turn out all right. They are going to build on the land, I gather, and Gerald, who is now paying a big premium, will be able to have a large salary at once in that country, Alberta says. The climate, it seems, is the very thing that has so often been recommended for my bronchitis. That is really very thoughtful of the children, isn't it?"

"I always said that you were like a hen that has hatched ducklings, Mary," said the candid old-maid friend. "Now that they are actually embarked upon the pond, you must just cluck a few times and forget them. The hen never takes to the water, you know."

But Aunt Mary shared her niece Alberta's objection to good advice.

The stars in their courses fought for the wonderful scheme of emigration. Dear old Tollbar Cottage was suddenly claimed by the Corporation to widen the High Street, and the idea of removing from the house where she had been born and lived all her life was as paralysing to poor Aunt Mary as the young people's project.

"I'll look after everything," announced Alberta. She was as helpful as she was business-like. "In fact, I have it all arranged provisionally already. We must book our berths early to ensure getting good ones, and you will help us to decide what to take, and which of the furniture will have to be sold."

"You will all want new flannels," said Aunt Mary promptly. "Will you pass me Cost & Robinson's list, please, Alberta?"

"It's buried under all the Canada literature in the rocking-chair, Auntie. But we shall need nothing like that, as a matter of fact. The winter is so mild that cattle are left out through the whole year, and outdoor picnics may be enjoyed in the glorious sunshine of Southern Alberta even in the winter months. And it says the houses are warmed. Of course, dear Aunt Mary, *you* would never go out when the weather was really severe; but it never is in Sunshine, because of

the Nichook wind. It's the Pacific coast that makes it so mild, really. Why, you'll love it," she added encouragingly. "You know, you always wished our hen-run was a little larger. And we can keep all kinds of things out there. And the educational facilities are equal if not superior to those in any city of the Old Country, it says. Qualified school-teachers, in particular, are in great demand. They command high salaries. Think what an opening for Sally. And what a glorious free life! We will all have ponies, and you can have a carriage to trundle about the prairie, instead of daundering round this wretched old market-place till you hate the sight of it."

"I could never hate the sight of Craven Bridge," Aunt Mary faltered. But Alberta was not listening. She had become immersed in a new pamphlet which Robin had brought home.

"Listen! Isn't this too true? 'Ten thousand superfluous women could be shot in the United Kingdom to-day and not one would be missed. Everybody would be glad. Canada *wants* these superfluous women. There are homes in Canada waiting for capable women. Canada wants wives.' Though, of course, that's nothing in my line. Still, there are Betty and Sally to consider, and, as Lady Royds says, this is not a marrying age. Oh, see, Aunt Mary, doesn't that look jolly? She's driving a pair of horses in a kind of lurry."

"I wonder if all this is true," said Aunt Mary timidly.

"Photographs are generally true," Alberta said scathingly. "See, here she is riding—they wear divided skirts—I think I could make one fit better

than that myself. But *jolly*, isn't it? Listen! 'After serving the men's lunch in the fields comes the week's ironing, after which I take a turn for three hours on the self-binder.' "

"Mrs. Bolton has one of those on her new machine. It's a Singer," Aunt Mary said with fresh interest.

"A self-binder is to cut the wheat," Alberta explained. "This one is worked by four horses. Where was I? oh—self-binder. 'After that comes a busy spell in the kitchen, for there are ten hungry hired men to provide for. Afterwards all the boys help to wash up, and after milking and attending to the dairy, my day concludes with a joy-ride into town or a lively surprise-party at a neighbouring farm. Dancing and merry-making go on to a late hour, but nevertheless everybody is up and doing at five the next morning.' Fancy that! And she's only a mother's help. Pretty different from the lot of an English governess. I saw Edna Jones taking those Bedale kiddies out to-day, and I did feel sorry for her. She was simply green with envy when I told her our plans."

"It sounds rather hard work," said Aunt Mary.

"But, of course, that doesn't exactly apply to us. I was only reading that to give you some idea of the *life*. See, there's a house. And there's another. That's right in Sunshine. Isn't it nice? "

"There seem to be a great many steps," said Aunt Mary, examining the picture. "Oh, there's a dentist. We shall be able to have Betty's teeth attended to."

"And that is an ice-cream parlour," cried Betty. "And it says chewing gum is a benefit, not a habit. I wonder if it's nice."



"It isn't at all nice," cried Aunt Mary. "And I won't move one step until you promise that none of you will ever do such a disgusting thing."

The next day Gerald booked six passages. The deed was practically done.

## CHAPTER II

### BON VOYAGE !

THE young Wests were self-reliant and practical to a man. Let it not be imagined that the momentous decision had been arrived at without careful consideration on everybody's part, before it was finally announced to Aunt Mary. Gerald, in his capacity of architect and business man, had gone deep into the matter of building, and arranged to a nicety just how much money, reduced to the medium of dollars, would be required to build a desirable family residence on Uncle Richard's town-lots. Two houses were to be erected, one for the use of the family, the other to be let at a nice high rental, but "only to people that one would like to have for neighbours," Alberta stipulated.

The Sunshine lawyer had sent a detailed plan of the city, with the property plainly indicated. It appeared to be situated in the best residential part of the town, about a mile and a half from the railway depot, and close to an electric tram-route. To the north, the lots overlooked Queen Alexandra Park, which afforded facilities for tennis and cricket, with an ornamental lake for boating, and a race-track. The river was not far from the site of their future home, being approached

by what the map described as a coulee, where Alberta decided to have her duck-house in convenient proximity to the water.

Robin, who had a knack for carpentry, had drafted out a plan for a boat which he said he could make at home at very small cost.

"We shall spend lots of time on the river," Alberta said, "what with skating and sleighing in winter, and boating and fishing in summer. I can't decide whether to buy a gun here or leave it till I see what kind of thing they use out there."

They all spoke of their destination as "out there" in a casual, experienced sort of way, with the exception of Aunt Mary, who called it "that dreadful place."

"You make me so unhappy with all this talk of shooting and boats and dangerous things. However, if you are all going to be so busy making money, you will have very little time to run into danger."

"I think I shall wait about the gun," Alberta said, ignoring this comment; "the Captain said that he was going to give me something that would be useful to me out there. It is no good having two, when there are so many things that we shall require."

It happened fortunately for the carrying out of the venture that the finances of the family were available for the moment in a good round lump, modest, but more than sufficient to cover the sum that their calculations had arrived at. A yearly income amounting to about sixty pounds accrued to each of the young people, the capital not being available till the youngest, Betty, came of age, a performance of which she fell deplorably five years short. Thanks to several pro-

tracted visits with wealthy relatives and the small demands on even a limited dress allowance of the quiet life at Craven Bridge, Alberta happened to have quite a nice little nest-egg accumulated, as also had young Robin, his being saved, at Aunt Mary's instigation, with the intention of launching him in a profession. It was still intact, as though now twenty years old he had shown no particular leaning to any profession, save that of being a fairly skilful amateur photographer and an enthusiastic nature-student.

He showed himself quite content to spend his time in the diversions Craven Bridge and the country side afforded, and was perhaps the most popular boy in the place. By inclination he was an outdoor lad, but a delicate chest in childhood had inflicted the martyrdom of a reputation of delicacy on his youth, and robbed him of the advantage of a public-school education.

Harrow had given Gerald a high opinion of himself, and it was some disappointment to Aunt Mary when the boy chose to qualify as an architect rather than "slog" for scholarships at the University. However, she recognised that the lad's talent lay more in his fingers and eyes than in his brain, and very willingly put her own savings to his, to pay the premium which was to make an architect of him with a number of letters after his name. At the present time he had least to put into the pool, but the young folks had everything in common, and in the Land of Opportunity Gerald was to be the first to reap a golden harvest.

"We have enough in hand," quoth Alberta, in business-like diction, "to get the house built and to see us through the first winter, with a little over in case

of emergency. Once out there, we shall all begin to make money at once, and the rest will be easy. I have been thinking about the vacuum cleaner. Robin can work it splendidly. He could make many a dollar that way, while he was looking out for a job."

"I thought I was going to homestead," protested Robin. "You can go out charing yourself, if you think it's so jolly nice."

"I shouldn't mind a bit," said Alberta. "It would be rather fun. And you'll certainly have to get down to work, just as I intend to. You'll only be on the homestead for six months of the year. Everybody works out there, and nobody thinks a bit the worse of you, whatever you do."

"I hope you will always behave as a lady," put in Aunt Mary uneasily.

Betty looked aghast.

"Oh *no*, Aunt. Not in Canada ! Me and Sally are going to live with Robin on the homestead, and keep chickens."

"It will do the girls no harm to run wild a bit," said the experienced Alberta, in return for much support in argument from her younger sisters.

"But Betty will have to begin to qualify as a teacher at once," reminded Aunt Mary.

Alberta whiffled the objection away.

"All these details can be better settled out there," she said. "Sally, what *have* you done with the steamship labels again ? Auntie, I really do not see how we can have the hat-box 'Wanted on the Voyage.' The state-room will be quite full."

The weeks since they had booked their passage seemed to fly past like minutes. There were now but

three days before sailing. Captain Kingsway dropped in that evening. He had in his hand a long parcel, which, after a quick scrutiny, Alberta decided might possibly be a gun that would take in two pieces.

"I wish he wouldn't look so glum," she thought uncomfortably. "But it's awfully nice of him about the gun."

"We want you to promise to come out to the West to see us," she hailed him. "You're getting such an old stay-at-home that you don't realise how easy and safe travelling is nowadays."

Kingsway smiled the quiet smile of a man who goes a little lame from Central African exploring, and carries a scarred face that has looked Death in the face in the Punjab.

"Then you must promise to use this out of respect for an old traveller," he said gravely. "A promise for a promise!"

"I promise," said Alberta gleefully. "Can a duck swim?" She fumbled eagerly at the wrappings. "There'll be any amount of wild life out there," she said.

"Oh, any amount," agreed the Captain. "But, you know, it's not what you see in the water that's really harmful. It's what you don't see that does the mischief."

"There are no crocodiles in Canada," protested Alberta scornfully. "What—whatever is it?"

A dull metal object was in her hand, with a bright silver tap.

"Just a filter—a Berkefeld. An absolute necessity in the place you are going to. They may tell you different, but *I* know."

"It's awfully thoughtful of you," said Alberta in a subdued tone. "Thank you so much."

He left early, after talking about typhoid and defective drainage for nearly an hour. Alberta felt dejected.

"At any rate we shan't want this thing on the voyage," she said peevishly. "Poor old thing! He seems to think he has to take great care of us. I didn't care to hurt his feelings by telling him that the water supply at Sunshine comes direct from the Belly River, and is the purest in the world. He is so antiquated in his ideas. What an eye-opener for him when he comes to see us out there!"

And so, with a tremendous amount of energy and organising, a whirl of good-bye visits, a round of packing and shopping very enjoyable to the younger members of the party, and a period of what was described as "eye-piping" on Aunt Mary's part, the thing was done. Almost before their friends had realised the stupendous fact that they were actually going, the luggage, a tremendous stack it appeared, had made a sensation with its sea-going labels on the country-station platform. The Mothers' Class surrounded Aunt Mary with tearful farewells, and offerings of knitted comforters and hug-me-tights to protect her against an Arctic winter.

Alberta, whose zeal had found time, even in the frenzy of getting ready, to carry on some entirely disinterested propaganda work for the Emigration Department, leaned half out of the window until the last minute, earnestly encouraging two young men, a junior assistant from the Carnegie library and the butcher's son, to try their luck out there. The seed

had fallen, it appeared, on good soil, for both youths were by now in a state of seething indignation, contrasting their present poorly paid lot with Alberta's bright vision of the Canadian West.

"I'll look out, and write as soon as I get places for you," she promised. "Try to save your money, and get your kit ready, so as to waste no time."

"We will that, Miss Alberta," promised the youths fervently. Their faces glowed with the rare hope of the Promised Land. Over their shoulders—aye, a good six inches over—a lean, glum face looked inquiringly.

Alberta started.

"Oh, good-bye! Good-bye!" she cried penitently. The would-be emigrants faded into oblivion. She had hardly realised in the excitement that this was really a permanent good-bye. The Captain's rueful countenance brought it home to her.

"I didn't see you before," she said regretfully. "I wish you didn't look so sorry—as if we weren't going to have the time of our lives!"

"I'm coming along to Liverpool, to see you all off. Is there room?"

Everybody made room with acclamation. The compartment was already full enough for comfort, with six human passengers, one dog, a canary in a cage and a cat in a box, besides a number of inanimate packages, considered by their various owners too precious to be allowed out of sight.

Aunt Mary dried her eyes and waved a last good-bye to the Mothers, the boys shouted an uproarious farewell to a few friends on the platform, and Alberta, who was sitting opposite the Captain, who was sandwiched



between Betty and Sally, felt suddenly self-conscious and uncomfortable.

"Isn't it glorious to have actually got off!" she said as breezily as she could. The remark fell a little flat.

Kingsway was telling Aunt Mary that it was wise to go to bed and get warm if she felt bad, and her sisters were exploring boxes of chocolates. Alberta felt a little hurt that she was left out of this treat, for she liked chocolates. She was sure that he did not approve of the expedition, and of her as the author of it. She was vexed with herself for caring whether he was pleased or not. It was nothing but a stupid family habit. As far back as Alberta could remember, he had been almost like an elder brother to them all, and they had looked for his support or disapproval of all their childish adventures. Kingsway had been a great favourite of the father who died when Alberta was only fourteen, and the children had been used to regard him more as their father's contemporary than theirs. When he came back to Craven Bridge, invalided from the Service, and with ample leisure to mind his neighbours' business, he showed himself still more than willing to arrogate to himself the privileged position of guide, philosopher, and friend to the fatherless, motherless troop of young chums who made him a welcome comrade.

Alberta felt vaguely annoyed at his manner over this project—it seemed to suggest that they had no right to act independently of his opinion. He clearly disapproved. He said little, but she felt that he was implying a good deal. His name of "Captain," which they had used much as one calls a large protecting

dog, was no misnomer. He had captained their affairs for so long, as a matter of course, even sharing seaside holidays with them, and taking an elder-brotherly attitude towards all their undertakings, that it was just a little alarming, though alluringly adventurous, to feel that they were setting out now uncaptained and entirely, gloriously on their own.

After all, they had not a prolonged parting. Everyone stuck together like limpets, and general leave-takings are not sentimental.

"You'll write, Alberta?" the Captain said. He had successfully smuggled himself aboard the tender.

"Of course. But Aunt Mary's the chief letter-writer at our house," said Alberta. "There'll be lots of news. I'll send you some photographs."

Kingsway held her hand a minute, and looked at her solemnly. She wished he would not "spoil everything" by looking so dismal and severe.

"I do hope you will have the jolly time you're expecting," he said jerkily. "I hope you may, that's all."

Alberta's eyes swam suddenly. She had not meant to feel sorry at all. They had all agreed, except Aunt Mary, who had proved the rule in most of their arrangements, that it was ridiculously antiquated, in these days of easy travelling, to behave like the Exile of Erin upon quitting one's native shores.

Alberta wished she was as young as Betty, who had just loudly kissed the Captain several times, despite her sixteen years.

"Oh, I say," Robin cried, perturbed to exasperation by the novelty of travel, "we *must* keep together, whatever we do! It's our only chance."

"Alberta," Kingsway was saying in a low voice. He held her by the hand a little away from the others. "There was something I would like to have said—oh, hang it! Sally child, I beg your pardon! Give me that thing to carry!"

Now Sally was the possessor of a plain but cherished cat, which she had insisted upon bringing, and refused to hand into any care but her own until it was safe in the hands of the ship's butcher, whose special province is the charge of passengers' pets. Rip, the yellow dog, on a stout chain, was making Gerald busy a few paces ahead. The beloved cat travelled in a substantial barred cage of mahogany and wrought-iron of great weight and bulk, whose corner had just alighted with some force on the Captain's instep. He took the box out of Sally's weary arms and carried it on board, while Alberta took the bird-cage from Robin, who was sensitive to ridicule. The gong sounded for all ashore, and people began to joke in shaky voices to cover up emotion.

"Good-bye!" shouted the Captain, comprehensively, from the gangway. He was the last to go ashore, and he looked so pleasant and kind that a young girl who was travelling alone and had no one to see her off, shouted a "Good-bye" back at him, just for the feel of it.

"I say, Alberta," he began. He had come back, and the seaman was waiting to take up the gangway. "I've sent a little case on board for you. There's that little twenty-two bore I had as a boy, and some fishing-tackle for you. Good-bye!"

Good-byes are sad at the best of times. Perhaps it is because they are so desperately sad at the sailing

of a liner that people go below and eat with jokes on their lips, and try not to remember that outside the shores of England are sliding, sliding out of sight in mist and gathering dimness. When the Wests went on deck after dinner, all astern was wrapped in a cloak of mist, save for a space of grey waves and following gulls. A sea-breeze blew up cheerily in their faces as they stood by the rail, looking West, into the goal of all their hopes and ambitions, still golden with the last rays of the sunset.

Aunt Mary heaved a sigh which was felt to be ill-timed and inappropriate.

"Robin, will you go and see if they'll let you go into the baggage-room?" asked Alberta. "I do want to open that case the Captain brought."

"They won't. And the chap that sat next me at dinner said there isn't any game at all in the part of Canada we're going to, so what use will a gun be to you?"

"I don't believe that," said Alberta.

Aunt Mary yielded to persuasions to retire early, and Alberta saw her comfortably tucked up in the state-room they were to share. Betty and Sally went to bed in a tremendous hurry, greatly excited over the novelty of their tempting quarters. Poor Robin, who had qualms he tried to conceal as to the unknown miseries of sea-sickness, had disappeared, and her brother Gerald was leaning on the rail, smoking a cigar, and talking to a man with a check cap several sizes too small.

"How very injudicious of Gerald!" she thought. "I wonder who gave him that cigar. He's sure to be bad after that!"

Herself, she felt as lively as a cricket, and as if all the fun of her life was going to begin at once.

"We must pick up some wrinkles about Canada and the Canadians on board," she thought. "Many of these people are sure to be returning Canadians. I've heard that there's nothing easier than making friends aboard a ship."

She strolled round the decks, taking stock of her fellow-passengers, and wondering how these easy friendships were started. It seemed no simpler to become acquainted with total strangers at sea than ashore.

A languid voice from a deck-chair said, "That's the menagerie girl"; and Alberta blushed at thought of the dog, cat, and canary which had accompanied the party. This was not a promising opening, and she missed the next advance with a very unpromising "*I beg your pardon!*" which sounded as if it came from the lips of a young lady with strong views on the subject of class distinctions. The advance certainly came from an objectionable-looking person, in the form of a ventriloquial sound representing a squeak from a trombone close to her ear. It was followed by an over-amiable leer from a fat, smooth face under a shock of hair and a bull-dog cap, and Alberta had no reason to suspect that she was "turning down" a Canadian Honourable and Dominion M.P.

After this, she sought the shelter of a deck-chair, and fell quite naturally into talk with a queasy young man who tucked a rug round her and said something about the weather.

He proved a veritable storehouse of wrinkles, and showed himself willing to instruct and edify.

"Then you really know Sunshine?" cried Alberta, delighted.

"Sure! I'm going back there right now!"

She begged him eagerly to tell her what Sunshine was like and whether it was not a desirable spot to own land in. It was vexing to be told that it was a "rotten joint," and that anybody who had invested in it had "likely gotten stung."

"But Uncle Richard had lived in Canada for years," Alberta said. "Nobody would be able to sting him."

"Was he English?"

"Of course he was!"

"All Englishmen get stung. That's what they're for. But I guess you'll be all right. Say, you're a peach, you are. I'll see you right there. You a s'nographer? You can git all kinds of money if you're smart, and say, you kin room with an old girl I know. She's a real decent old gink. If I give you an introduction to her, she'll take you in vurry reasonable."

Mr. Stringer seemed disappointed to learn that she was not travelling alone.

"I wish I knew how to do stenography," said she. "It seems to be the thing in Canada. Everybody works there, and it doesn't matter a bit what you do, does it?"

"Nice girls like you don't hev to work long, you betcher," returned the young gallant. Alberta was sorely tempted to get up and run away, but told herself that this was the simple, hearty way of which she had read so much.

"He can't eat me," she reflected, "and I'm learning the language beautifully. I wonder what the Captain would think of me!" Aloud she continued: "I

suppose there's any amount of sport to be had. I've brought my gun, and a fishing-rod, and all that sort of thing."

"Sure! Oh, say, we'll go duck-hunting, you'n me. I guess I kin take a holiday any old time to go with a lady. I gotten plenty of dollars. I kin please myself what I do. I don't hev to ask any person. Say, there's class to a girl like you!"

"I—I really think I ought to go to my Aunt," said Alberta vaguely. "Of course, he just meant to pay me a compliment," she thought. "Canadian ways are bound to seem a little odd to us at first. I do hope Aunt Mary isn't going to be stereotyped and conventional and tiresome. I must have a good talk with her. And—how has Gerald managed to pick up with the red-haired girl so quick? I do wish he would be more discreet!"

## CHAPTER III

### BY SEA AND LAND

It was surprising how much the young Wests contrived to pick up about their future home before they set foot on Canadian soil.

Being a sociable and friendly family they soon found plenty of people to speak to, many of whom were liberal with advice. Alberta assimilated it all greedily. Knowledge of any kind was sure to be useful, she said. She was determined to follow the excellent instructions of the emigration literature and become a Canadian as speedily as possible.

"Out there," she explained to Aunt Mary, in the middle watch of the night, when they were both sleepless,—“out there, that man in the big cap was telling me, you don't have to ask anybody what their father does, or whether they had a grandmother. It isn't considered polite.”

"They are welcome to know all about my father and grandfather too," said Aunt Mary, whose voice was weak but still determined. "It would be ill-mannered to *ask* such a question under any circumstances, as I am sure you know very well."

"I suppose it would," agreed Alberta. "But you can quite see what they mean. It's because we're



rather given to talking about our people that they don't particularly like the English over there."

"Not like the English! Oh dear, oh dear! And all the time I thought we were going to remain in British territory, under the same old flag. I'm sure I heard you all saying so!"

"A broader spirit of Imperialism, that's all," said Alberta. "You see, Aunt, the ill-feeling was all caused by the remittance-men. They come over here in bellows-pants and Norfolk jackets, and go to the Post Office for their money. They call them 'Sparrow-legs' out there. I forget just why they don't like it, but that's what the man with all the hair was saying. They've given the English a bad name."

"That sounds as if Gerald will not have to wear his new suits. And he spent such a lot on them," sighed Aunt Mary.

"I guess he'd have done better to get the kind of thing they wear out there," said Alberta thoughtfully. "I'd hate to have them call him 'Sparrow-legs,' and a man is certain to be turned down if he goes to ask for a job in a short-trousers outfit. And you don't have to keep saying, 'We don't do this or that in England.' Everybody is expected to fall into the customs of the country. At Rome do as Rome does, you know. The man in the big cap said he knew a chap get fired for saying that they didn't have potatoes for breakfast in Yorkshire. So we shall have to be careful."

"It sounds very difficult. However, I don't know that it will matter what an old body like me does."

"Well, whatever you do, admire everything you

see. They seem to be dreadfully touchy, and can't bear to be criticised."

"It is always nicer to speak good than ill of anybody or anything," Aunt Mary remarked vaguely. "It seems a great deal of trouble has been wasted in bringing you all up if you are going to begin differently all over again. I wish I could go to sleep. I can't think why they want to scrub the floors in the middle of the night."

It was a pleasant experience, that first crossing of the Atlantic. There were not a great many passengers, and everybody sat in other people's deck-chairs, just where they felt inclined.

A turn round the decks might come upon Sally, bright-eyed and rosy, discussing farming topics wisely with an overgrown schoolboy, whose parents had found him a tough nut to crack, and sent him off to be cracked in Canada. He was not an ungentlemanly lad, and Sally was beginning to think that it would be nicer to homestead with him than in cross Robin's company. Robin, who was a little sea-sick, was inclined just then to make himself agreeable to anybody rather than his sisters, and showed a tendency to shake off the "flappers."

Betty was proving herself a veritable Sherlock Holmes, and sucked what Canadians call "beaux" dry of information with the industry of a bee, afterwards disclosing revelations with relentless minuteness.

"The second officer says that thing called Stringer isn't nearly so young as he looks. He says he's a hard case, and plays poker like an old hand. Gerald's red-haired one is rather nice, I think. She's going out

to be married to a man she hasn't seen for four years. Isn't it romantic? Gerald says it is a rotten shame. I call it a splendid romance, don't you, Aunty?

"Oh, and you've seen that one in the green bonnet, that Robin seems to find such good company? Well, she's made the trip three times this year, and gives a different name each time. The second officer can't make her out, he says. The purser's an awfully interesting character, Alberta. Fancy! He's really an Italian Count, and had a wonderful old castle in Italy. You can tell by his face that he is a real patrician. Do look at him, Alberta. Go and ask him for our valuables, and notice what a splendid nose he has! I can't come with you, for I've been twice to-day."

"You might try to find out something about that boy called Stringer," Alberta said.

"Oh, I *know* all about him! He's a boy out of a livery-barn. He comes from Sunshine. His father's a baker in Birmingham."

Alberta coloured. She had shrunk from such grueling cross-examination. The duck-hunting expedition seemed less feasible.

"Of course, in Canada there are no social distinctions," she said. "The poor fellow is no worse if he does drive a cab."

"N-no," said Betty. "But he's not so very nice if he didn't drive a cab. I should turn him down flat if I were you, Alberta."

It was difficult to select the chaff from the grain of Betty's gleanings, but Alberta began to feel less gloriously confident in the curiously mixed society

opening out before her. She would almost have consulted with Aunt Mary at that juncture, but that lady, on finding her sea-legs, had struck up a friendship with another elderly lady returning to her home in Montreal, in whom she had discovered a friend of her girlhood. Towards the end of the voyage she disclosed a talent for independent action which her nephews and nieces had never given her credit for.

Gerald, who had been deep in conversation with a tall, military-looking man, came to the others with a number of rough sketches on the backs of envelopes. He looked pleased and excited.

"Tents," he explained importantly. "Far better than our original idea of staying at the hotel till we get the house built. In less than a week we shall save the cost of the outfit, and it will be quite feasible to live in them all winter if necessary. Then, after we get into our house, the outfit is the very thing for Robin's homestead. The idea is, you see, to have a camp on the lots. A square marquee for the meal-tent, a caboose for cooking, and two sleeping-tents, one for us and one for you girls. Aunt Mary could have a little one to herself," he went on in soothing tones, for Aunt Mary had started violently. "These tents are the real thing, in regular use in the country, as supplied to construction-camps. I happened to have the chance of securing the whole thing, stove and all, from that tall chap with the spectacles. He has the outfit to dispose of. A snap, I can tell you. So, of course, I just clinched it. He sends the whole works f.o.b. as far as Winnipeg."

"Hurrah!" cried Sally and Betty.

"Aunt Mary, what on earth are you looking like that for?" demanded the architect. "These are not *bathing* tents. That's the only kind you've ever seen. They're splendid, I tell you! You have board-floors if you like, and you bank 'em at the sides with gumbo, which is some material you can get awfully cheap out there. Alberta! Aunt Mary's going to faint or something."

"I'm all right," said their aunt weakly. "You are all most considerate and nice, I'm sure, and it's really very kind of you to think of making me a separate tent. But—Mrs. Baldwin has asked me to stay with her in Montreal for a few weeks, and if you could manage without me, I really think——"

Alberta looked at her brother with unspeakable relief.

"That's a dandy idea," she said. "We shall be able to get things ship-shape before you come; for, of course, Aunt Mary, we can't think of letting you rough it at all."

"You are always so sweet and considerate," murmured Aunt Mary. "I'm afraid I'm too old to begin to keep house in a tent."

"Not a bit of it," cried Alberta. "Just give us a few weeks and you'll soon see how convenient it will be. No passages to keep tidy, and no fireplaces. We will get a Chinaman to come every day and do the chores, and the boys will buck all the wood before they go to their work."

"I can't help wishing we had taken return tickets," faltered Aunt Mary. "You take my breath away! Going into camp like the Territorials."

"Everybody camps in Canada," asserted Alberta.

"Thousands of families live in tents. You'll *love* it, and it will be a most useful experience, for there's all sorts of money to be made out there cooking for threshing outfits, and so on."

"Oh, Alberta, I can't! I'm sure I could never make money in that way," expostulated Aunt Mary. "If it were really necessary, I think I should do better at washing."

"How absurd! Of course *you* can't. But I can and will. *You* will have nothing to do but just—oh, just sort of superintend things in our dear little camp—will she, Gerald?"

"Sure. And write letters—and play the—h'm, I don't know about a piano in a tent,—but oh, there will be lots of nice things that *you* can do, Aunt! But please don't make difficulties, for goodness' sake! It's going to be quite trying enough without that."

"*Why* is it trying?" asked Alberta sharply. "For goodness' sake don't you get cold feet, Gerald!"

"Cold feet! What language, my dears! What extraordinary expressions you are picking up! I shall certainly stay with the Baldwins as long as they will put up with me. When I see you again, I am afraid you will all be talking Red Indian."

Alberta had enriched her vocabulary considerably from her conversations with Mr. Willy Stringer. She had her doubts, all the same, as to whether his diction was common to all grades of culture in that wide Dominion, and was beginning to think that it might be as well to stick to humdrum English for the present. She was anxious to let the friendly youth see that she did not want too much of him.

But it was difficult when he made himself so polite, and more so when he began to be pathetic.

"I figure you'll turn me down flat when you get among folks in Sunshine," he said dejectedly. "There was a girl once—a real nice girl she was—and I'd have married her, but she turned me down. I guess I'd have been running my own hotel by now, if it wasn't for that girl."

He sighed, and Alberta felt sorry. He seemed to have had a hard life.

"Of course I shan't turn you down," she said indignantly. "My Aunt will be pleased to see you at the camp any time. But our land is a little way from the centre of the town, and as I haven't the map here, I can't tell you where we shall live."

"I'll take you out riding in a buggy," said the youth more cheerfully. "You kin find me 'most any time round at Shipney's livery-barn. 'Most everybody in Sunshine knows Willy Stringer."

It was a relief to learn that Mr. Stringer was going on West from Montreal in the Colonist car, for nobody wanted to be ushered into Sunshine under his wing, still less to spend four days in the train in his company. They saw the last of him in an ice-cream parlour in Montreal, sucking a David Harum up a straw. He wore huge fringed gauntlets with red stars on the wrists, and Alberta, who had been sampling strange dainties in the same shop, did her best not to look at him, and succeeded.

In Montreal they parted with Aunt Mary, but resisted a tempting invitation to stay a few days with the hospitable Baldwins, who had a nice house on "the Mountain." They were all hungry for the West;

and the civilisation of Montreal did not appeal to the humour of the pioneers. They accordingly secured sleepers in the Imperial Limited, tourist car, westward bound, and after a break-neck exploration of the town, repaired, very tired, happy, and excited, to the depot the same evening, to continue their journey to the Golden West.

A new country. A new life opening up before five lively young Britons, all agog for new experiences and what they vaguely called "real life." They enjoyed every inch of the way ; enjoyed the stuffy sleeping-berths, the scratch meals which their 'prentice-hands cooked on the little stove on the train ; enjoyed the scramble down the swaying train to feed the dog and cat in the baggage-car, and the company of fellow-travellers also bound for the new West. The clanging train-bell sounded exhilarating in ears too excited to be sleepy, and the sudden arc-lights reflected in dark waters, that came up out of nothingness as they sped through moonless nights, were alluring and suggestive.

The vast monotony of a great waste continent was enjoyable too, by the very gaunt sameness of it, the very gaunt multitude of fire-scorched jack-pines that seemed to be marching, an endless ragged regiment, still West, West, towards the red sunset.

Alberta had conceived a plan to ride on the cow-catcher, of which airy seat she had read so much, but the idea was abandoned as not at all worth the bribe of one of those grimy ten-dollar-bills for which they had exchanged their nice crisp Bank of England notes.

She threw down in disgust the little book about the



Canadian Pacific Railway which she had brought with her to compare with the real thing.

"It doesn't say, 'For ever and ever, for ever and ever!'" she cried angrily. "I wonder why people write such rubbish! There isn't a word of truth in it! It says that a coyote slinks past in the long prairie grass, and little gophers, whatever they are, sit up and stare at us; an elk springs lightly into the bush, a prairie chicken whirs by on startled wing; a covey of wild duck rises up at our approach from the edge of a reed-fringed pool. And here we've actually come two thousand miles without setting eye on a living creature."

It was true. The journey across Canada, by the route of the Canadian Pacific, is not enlivened by details of Nature. You may travel day after day, past the lone grandeur of Thunder Bay, through wastes of jack-pine and oceans of prairie, and see not a bird or a rabbit or any insect save the ever-present mosquito and house-fly. There is indeed a certain impressiveness in the silence and the lifelessness of the uncleared wilderness of Northern Ontario, a sad solitude that harmonises with the lonely, lonely grave beside the narrow track. Thousands of travellers pass by, year in, year out, and pay each a fleeting meed of respect to the memory of that nameless, lonely pioneer, laid there in the wilds where many pass by but none stay. No life, and save for a rare log-hut, the shelter of the survey-man or railway worker, no homes. No prosperous clusters of farm-buildings, with lowing herds and green fields, and a flicker of children's pinafores playing by the brookside. Lone rivers, winding solitary to a cold lone sea; logs float-

ing down, higgledy-piggledy, towards the saw-mills : rarely a horse, more rarely a man.

But spirits rose when they awakened at last to find the jack-pines a thing of the past, and to see wide green plains spreading to the sky-line on each side of the wire-fenced track.

Stations marked on the route-map were here little more than a name on a post ; a hotel and a livery-barn, and sometimes a small Hudson Bay store, marked the path of progress. Otherwise, little more of what Western newspapers call "live" interest was forthcoming. Here and there a wide ploughed fire-belt bordered the trail ; once they saw a sea of spring wheat, a glorious green sea speaking volumes of the long, cruel clutch of a seven-months winter from which the lone land was but now awakening in the heart of July.

"Look at here," said an enthusiastic Canadian, who had been teaching Alberta and Robin to play poker. "All this will be ready for the elevator in three weeks from now."

"Will it really ? It looks very short and young," Alberta said. "In England they don't cut corn when it's green, I'm sure. Oh, I beg your pardon ! I forgot you don't like hearing what we do in England."

"Things are vurry different in this Western country. I guess it will take you some consid'able time to get into conditions out here."

"At any rate, we are not going to grow corn at present," said Alberta peaceably.

"You cert'nly won't grow any in Alberta. It can't be done."

"Oh yes," said Alberta. "Why, it's the home of the Alberta red wheat, and banner oats too. It says so here!"

"That's not corn, that's grain," said the Canadian scathingly. "Corn's what you folks call maize, I guess."

"No, corn is oats or wheat, any kind of grain. You give a horse corn."

"I'd be scared to death to feed a horse grain," remarked the instructive person sententiously.

"I suppose we must do as Rome does, then, and call corn grain here, or we shall be misunderstood," said Alberta.

"I shall call things just what I have a mind," said Robin crossly. "I bet they'll understand *me*."

Robin had failed to receive meekly the spirit of emigration as it was set forth in the little books. He declined to learn the language, and refused deafly to carry a portmanteau when his sister referred to it as a grip. He was getting heartily sick, too, of the train and everybody in it.

And so, to cut a long story short, on and on, fortunately not "for ever and ever." And the prairie rolled a little, like the book said, but not so much, and the same old sun set in the west and rose in the east, much as it did at home. Once somebody saw a moose swimming a river, and everybody else was too late to see it and said it was a piece of wood. And there were more hotels, and livery-barns, and real estate offices, and Hudson Bay stores; and so at last, at six o'clock on a bright morning, five distracted travellers, a dog and a cat in a cage got out of the

train, and stood on the platform listening to the bell tolling a solemn knell to the imaginings of their young hearts.

“So here we are at Sunshine!” said Alberta brightly.

## CHAPTER IV

### BUFFALO CAMP

THERE they were at Sunshine indeed.

It appeared to be a place of some importance, judging by the extent of the railway sidings, and the buildings of different kinds that were to be seen. Nothing, certainly, very imposing: an elevator painted yellow, a theatre painted blue and green, an open space which was one day to be a recreation-ground, at present like a flat volcano in active eruption. Between the eager immigrants standing at the station-gate and the City of Sunshine there stretched a sea of mud the like of which had never before greeted their sight even in a county famed for its muddy lanes. They looked at the mud, looked at their boots, and laughed nervously.

"We'll take the electric car to Queen Alexandra Park," said Gerald. "It's too dirty to walk. I propose we go up straight away and have a look at the lots. It is only six o'clock, and the agent will hardly be out of bed. Robin, will you stay and get the baggage checked, or whatever you have to do to it, and get the tents carted up to the site? Sally, what on earth are you crying about?"

Sally had burst into tears, with the person of her

cherished cat clasped tight in her arms. She had taken the first opportunity to remove it from its travelling-box, and it was looking about it rather forlornly, its ears pressed very flat against its head.

"There won't be anywhere to put the Meritorious One!" she sobbed. The difficulty had only just presented itself to her. "He will be sure to get out of the tent and run away. And I won't leave him here by himself. I shall bring him in my arms to the lots."

"This is childish," said Gerald. "You can't go in a tram with a box labelled 'Live Cat,' that's flat. At least, not with me."

"Ask the stationmaster to take care of him for a bit," suggested Robin. "Rip can stay with me. Or he can go on the top of the tram."

"There doesn't seem to be a stationmaster. Or a porter. Or anything," said Alberta dubiously. "But, of course, it's only six o'clock. Come on, Gerald! Let's get a workmen's car up to the Park, and the others can come on when they've settled the cat."

Gerald fixed his eyeglass and gazed up and down the landscape. "That looks like the principal street," he said. "The tram-route doesn't seem very convenient to the station."

They ploughed in grim silence through the billows of half-congealed clay, and came out into what seemed to be the principal street. It had cement side-walks, liberally coated with mud. The roadway was like a ploughed clay-field.

"The cars must not be running so early," said Alberta.

"There aren't any lines," Gerald said. He looked into the blue sky for signs of overhead traction,

and down the empty street for signs of human occupation. "There's a chap. I'll ask him."

A young man in a white shirt and green plush trousers came out of a door, spat into the road, and began to flick the wooden steps of "Ryan's Saloon" with a broom. Alberta heard him laugh, and Gerald returned with a dejected countenance.

"It seems there aren't any trams in Sunshine yet at all," he announced. "I wonder if there's any chance of getting a cab."

"There *are* cabs, because the Stringer boy on the boat belonged to a cab-yard. They call it a livery-barn," said Alberta. "Suppose we walk. It would be so awkward to get him for a driver."

Everybody seemed to be abed, and to ask more questions was only to court ridicule. So they consulted the sketch-map Gerald had in his pocket, and started out in what the position of the sun told them was a south-easterly direction for that suburb adjacent to Queen Alexandra Park.

"It's very *nice*, isn't it?" said Alberta.

They had gained a wide cement side-walk, and scraped off some of the heavy mud which clung to their feet. Mud! It was more like mortar! It was not the Sunshine of their dreams. There were no golden wheat-fields stretching to the horizon, no log-houses nestling amid rich stacks of hay and corn, nor anything else that had figured in the picture of their imagination.

Neither had the photographs in the *Clarion Publicity Number* conveyed a very correct impression. More than anything else in their limited experience, Sunshine suggested the Royal Agricultural Show, with its wide

straight avenues, bordered with beautifully kept grass boulevards, cement or wooden side-walks, and billows of ploughed-up mud in the roadway. A dolls' town of small clean houses, each standing alone in a trim grass-plot, painted in spotless white or gay colours, with roofs of stained shingles at all angles.

Each house had a little verandah, where a hammock swung, or two rocking-chairs faced one another, and there were mud-plastered rubbers piled up by the fly-screen doors. Many people had gone to bed leaving the inner doors wide open, with nothing but a stretch of gauze to keep out intruders. Green blinds, jealously drawn, gave a curious uniformity to the houses, which otherwise displayed every possible diversity in form and colour.

Some had green railings and pretty little gates, in others neat pocket-handkerchiefs of lawn were quite open to the road, and nobody seemed to interfere with the sweet peas that were in full bloom against the walls.

"I should think there are lots of nice people living here," Alberta said. "Naturally, they are all in bed at present."

It was indeed a sleeping town. A curious silence was over the still, clear morning under the far, far blue sky, where small pearly clouds drifted in a detached, aimless way. No sparrows chattered, no cock saluted the morning cheerily; there was no stir in the broad leaves of the neat little trees along the baby-boulevards. No early milkman was astir, and there was no tramp of workmen going to their work. Only the network of telephone wires, that stretched from bare poles along all the bare streets, hummed restlessly.



Nearly every house was connected with telephone and electric light, and the trim order of it all under the great space of sky was oddly incongruous.

After following the side-walks for some distance, they came on the outskirts of the town. Cement underfoot gave way to a kind of very dirty deck, and vacant lots were more frequent.

A great red-brick school towered, dwarfing the houses; a wide space, part garden and part exercise-ground, surrounded a range of low buildings, and a man in uniform was running a flag up a white staff. The sunlight fell warmly on the boy's upturned face, and the folds of the Union Jack lingered over his fair head as the colour rose to its place. He looked lean and clean and English, and the sight was comforting to a wandering Briton.

"That's the nicest thing we've seen yet," said Alberta.

"The Mounted Police Barracks," said Gerald, consulting the map. "We've still another mile before we get to our place."

Through the scattered houses you saw the prairie now, a grey-green moorland, broken with occasional houses and wood huts.

A tethered cow, a pony dragging a broken chain as it grazed listlessly, and a long bank of mud, thrown up out of a deep, newly dug ditch, deep as a grave, stretching away, straight as an arrow, to terminate in some kind of machine on the horizon. "That may be the Park," said Alberta. "That thing looks something like the big wheel at Earls court."

"I think it's a steam-plough," said Gerald. "The Park must be another mile away."

“And oh! the mud!” cried Alberta, “and the path ends here!”

However, they found the short dry herbage of the prairie much better going than the slimy plank walk, and they followed a worn track hopefully until it terminated in a barbed-wire fence.

There was nothing before them but a similar stretch of unbroken prairie, with tufts of grey feathery grass, and close-growing herbage, that gave a faint aromatic smell when pressed underfoot. There were dwarf cactuses, and tiny fairy-like rose-bushes growing close to the ground. Alberta gathered exquisite little wild roses with cries of delight.

“But this won’t find the lots,” said Gerald, practical as ever. “And if the others should take another direction, they would certainly miss us. I vote we get back to town, have some breakfast, and then find this Mr. Wrigley, who knows all about the place.”

They accordingly retraced their steps to the depot, where they found Sally sitting disconsolately on what was known as the “Pull-cat,” being the Meritorious One’s private travelling-compartment. The others had adjourned to breakfast, but Sally and her cat refused to be parted, and she was sadly pushing bits of meat through the bars to comfort it. Gerald relented and shouldered the Pull-cat, and led the way through the mud to the hotel, where they breakfasted with wild extravagance on strange viands. By the time they left the hotel people were getting about the streets. Robin had been to the livery-barn near by, being first careful to ascertain that it was *not* A. Shipney’s, and chartered a rig and team to convey them to the site of their home, while a waggon was

to follow with the heavy baggage. The girls waited on the hotel steps while Gerald went to find the real estate agent who knew about the lots, and watched the signs of waking activity in the town. Rough-looking men came driving rougher horses in buggies that looked as if they had not been washed since they were made, some picturesque, with slouch hats, gay neckerchiefs, and weather-beaten faces, others merely dirty and unpleasant.

Nobody wore that aspect of hilarious prosperity which the young immigrants had been taught to expect upon the faces of settlers in Sunny Southern Alberta.

"It must be the mud that makes them look so cross," Sally said. "It's enough to make anybody cross."

Their spirits rose again, however, when Gerald returned with their correspondent, ready to escort them to their property, and Robin came on the scene with a roomy four-wheeled rig and ill-matched team that took very little notice of his driving.

The town left behind, open prairie before them, with the Rocky Mountains range clearly defined, more than a hundred miles to the west, for the only boundary-line, the sun shining brightly and a light breeze blowing, no one could have helped being happy.

Mr. Wrigley told them breezy anecdotes in racy American that they only understood by gusts, and the black water-tower south of the town was all but out of sight when at length he got down and, examining a small peg that was stuck in the ground, pronounced that he guessed it "must be somewheres about here." After some measuring and calculating, the lots were

eventually located, and Alberta stood rapt in contemplation of her very own seventy by a hundred and twenty feet of what their friend called "bald-headed prairie." There were roses on it, and there was no road to it; and they were monarchs of all they surveyed.

"Oh, *don't* disturb me for a minute," Alberta said impatiently, when Robin spoke. "I'm trying to realise it!"

"Realise?" said Mr. Wrigley. "Much better keep it for an investment, marm. It's a good buy, sure thing! There's only one drawback to it, and that is that your relative didn't have the corner-lot."

He went on to explain that when Ninth Avenue South was completed, it would form a corner-lot to the north of Alberta's property with the putative Twenty-first Street which was still a dream of the future. The then corner-lot, it appeared, together with theirs, would form a very valuable plot of land, whereas either, separate, was of comparatively small intrinsic value.

Providentially that identical corner-lot was at present on the market, in Mr. Wrigley's hands, and to be purchased a "snap."

"Look at here, you folks," said Mr. Wrigley; "you're figuring to build here, I guess? Well, wouldn't you hate to hev folks put up a miserable two-by-four shack on that corner, spoiling the look of your residence? *You* want that corner-lot."

"But nobody's at all likely to build on it," argued Gerald. "There's acres—miles of room."

"Yes, siree! But that's a corner-lot, mind! That lot is going to get the benefit of the sooter and

town's water as soon as they get Ninth Avenue laid out, whereas you might have to wait two or three years for Twenty-first Street to develop. Think this proposition over, folks, and come and see me about it any old time. You want that corner-lot. You need it the worst way. Yes, sir ! ”

Mr. Wrigley raised the little round hat that he wore on the top of a shock of thick hair, and got into the rig. He was riding back to town with Robin, who had to take the team back, and was anxious to hurry up the heavy baggage, so that they could erect the tents at once. The others spent half an hour in studying the flora and fauna and geological formation of their estate. There was very little else to observe.

“ H'm ! That corner-lot's worth two thousand dollars,” Gerald said thoughtfully. “ That means that Uncle Richard practically left you four thousand dollars in real estate. A jolly decent legacy, I call it ! ”

Alberta's heart swelled with pride and pleasure.

“ It will be our own fault if we don't make good,” she said. “ Hurrah ! Here comes Robin with the tents ! ”

And till the evening shadows fell, they all worked like niggers, getting the tents up and making the cook-stove draw. It was most essential that they should get into camp as soon as possible, as they were anxious to invest their money profitably, rather than let it be frittered away in ruinous hotel-bills. That night they camped in Spartan simplicity under half-built tents. Towards evening of the next day the girls were tired, and as there was nothing to sit down on in the camp, they proposed to walk into town for

a rest, and to make a few purchases to supplement the supplies that Robin had thoughtfully brought up with the luggage.

"I say, you might call at the lumber-yard and order a couple of loads of gumbo," shouted Gerald, crawling from under a collapsed tent. "Tell them to send it up right now. I don't know how much it will cost, but it says in the book that there's always plenty available."

The mud had dried up wonderfully since morning, and it was pleasant enough walking. Men were at work smoothing out the congealed billows of clay, with four horses and a platform of planks, and in the main street there were plenty of people to look at.

There were rows of lathered chins being shaved behind plate-glass windows in the barbers' shops, from which the girls turned away blushing, and solemn rows of men sitting on high chairs along the street having their shoes polished. Behind more plate-glass, more men sat with their feet up, staring into the street out of the hotel-corridors, and nearly all the men had small hats and great bangs of straight hair sticking out at the back. The shopmen were very affable, and said, "*How d'y'e do ? Pleased to meet you.*"

But where were the people of Alberta's dreams ? Where were those tall, stalwart men, the "Nature's gentlemen" whose eyes snapped, who put down their feet as if they owned the land they trod on, the fine fellows, too big-souled for the narrow ways of the Old Country, with big, chivalrous ways, and outdoor faces, and eyes that were used to looking out over great free spaces ?

Where, oh, where were those girls the young Wests

were looking forward to playing tennis with, and riding out to picnic and fishing excursions with, and dancing with in barns to the strains of Robin's fiddle? The athletic, frank-faced, capable girls, riding bronchos, roping steers, managing dairies, and enjoying a hearty, happy Colonial life? There were plenty of women in Sunshine, certainly. Elbow sleeves, no gloves, low necks and tight, short skirts, open stockings and high-heeled shoes, with the strangest things in hats, or no hats at all, was the rule of dress. And dress is the woman's best index to the nature of her fellows.

The combination of such gala attire with the clods of mud which adorned their feet made a grotesque effect. The faces of the women were for the most part pale, lined and preoccupied. The young girls talked very loudly. Paint was very much in evidence, and a stout matron was standing at a street-corner touching up her nose with a powder puff with the aid of a little mirror. Sally thought the ladies had very beautiful complexions. She had a good many freckles herself.

"They don't look much our sort," observed Alberta, "but I have no doubt there are lots of nice people. Some of those women, I'm sure, must be quite impossible, if there *are* no class distinctions. And even the decent women look every bit as conventional as they do at home. Oh, isn't that a lumber-yard? Let's go in and order the gumbo for Gerald."

A tall young man was unloading a waggon in the yard, and he stood up and straightened his back as if he were tired as the three girls approached.

"Have I come to the right place for gumbo?" Alberta asked of this young man. She had seen the

office in the yard and a person picking his teeth at the window, and preferred the man on the waggon. He wore blue overalls and had a spotted snakeskin round his slouch hat, and when Alberta spoke to him he started, and raised it quickly, looking at her with surprised blue eyes that had a touch of fun in them.

"Gumbo, is it? Well, I guess you have! Of all the dirty, muddy, God-forsaken places ever I struck, I think this dump about beats the lot."

"Then will you please have two loads sent up to our town-lots? They are at the corner of Ninth Avenue South and where Twenty-first Street will be made when it is made. My brother asked me to order it for him. And he would like it at once, please, if possible, so that he can finish the tents."

The teamster made an obvious effort to straighten the puckers of a grin out of his weather-reddened face before he answered. It was not very successful.

"Making tents, did you say. Say, that's too bad! He must have been taking a rise out of you."

Alberta flushed. There was no doubt that this teamster with the nice manners was laughing at her.

"Perhaps I had better transact my business at the office," she said coldly, turning away.

She did not look back, though she heard a mumbled apology. The person in the little office took out the toothpick and said, "Howd'ye do?" Alberta explained the errand that had brought her.

"Nope. We don't carry gumbo at this outfit. I guess I'd try a real estate office for that commodity if it was me. You've gotten a prurry good allowance on your feet."

She left the office with all the dignity she could



muster. For some reason these people were making game of her.

"I'm ready, Sally," she said sharply. Sally had stopped to speak to the man in the waggon.

"That man was quite nice," she said. "He was English. He wanted to know where we came from. He said he'd fix about the gumbo."

"It was very cheeky of him," Alberta said severely. "They were trying to make us ridiculous. You must be more particular about speaking to men. I think we will go to Mr. Wrigley. He will tell us what to do about it."

Mr. Wrigley was in his place of business. He smiled pleasantly, showing a magnificent set of teeth decorated with plenty of gold.

"So you've been thinking about that corner-lot," he said.

Alberta explained the difficulty about the gumbo, and shortly after left the place while the cackle of Mr. Wrigley's laughter resounded up the street. Indignation lent speed to her feet as she trudged back to the camp. Gerald hailed her cheerily.

"We're in splendid going-order," he said. "Your sleeping-tent is finished all but the gumbo, and we shall have that very soon. What on earth are you looking so shirty for?"

"I could kill you," said Alberta fiercely. "Just send me on any more fools'-errands if you dare! That's gumbo! Dirt! Mud! Slush! You stupid duffer!"

"Well, anyway," expostulated Gerald, "the chap's brought the first load and gone for the second. It's all right. Jolly good stuff."

"Well, you don't go and buy it in a shop!" fumed

Alberta. " You don't care how foolish you make me seem. That Mr. Wrigley is probably laughing yet."

" Was it an awfully handsome man with a snakeskin round his hat that brought the gumbo ? " Sally asked eagerly. " Then I think it was awfully nice of him, for we were really quite rude to him,—you were, rather."

" I suppose you didn't make a bargain with him," Gerald said. " Goodness knows what he'll charge."

The little camp was beginning to look quite inviting. There was a wooden floor to the girls' sleeping-tent, and the new hospital-beds were ready to put up. Robin had the stove going strong, and the frying-pan sizzling merrily. They were now sitting down about their picnic table, all gloriously hungry. A packing-case lid with a brown-paper cloth made a capital table, and Robin was no unskilful chef. At this juncture Alberta's friend of the snakeskin drove up with a second load of gumbo.

Gerald went to settle up, and came back with a red face.

" I say, this chap says he won't have anything. He's an awfully nice fellow. He said we must have been jolly well stung with this tent outfit, and he wants to help us to get fixed. I've asked him to have supper with us. You don't mind, do you ? "

" Not a bit," said Alberta. " You couldn't do less. Is there a smudge on my nose ? "

There were several, but she had only succeeded in spreading them when their guest joined them. However, she was looking pleasant again, and nobody bothered to tell her that she had a moustache of soot across her upper lip and over her cheek. There was as yet no looking-glass in Buffalo Camp.

The teamster was a well-built, big-mouthed young man, and his working suit of blue cotton jacket and overalls sat well on his big muscular limbs.

"I say, it's no end decent of you to have me in like this," he said awkwardly. His blue eyes looked wistful. "I don't believe I've been asked in—to a meal—with girls—since I left home."

"It was tremendously kind of you to bring us the gumbo," Alberta said. "Especially as I'm afraid I was rather rude about it. I don't like being laughed at."

"But it honestly was funny." Their visitor began to go off into a series of chuckles. "Two loads of gumbo! It sounded too absurd. It was no trouble to me, I assure you. I just took my waggon to the grading outfit out there——"

"We thought that was the big wheel in the recreation park at first," said Alberta, with sparkling eyes.

"And they dumped me a load in without any trouble. You see, I thought being strangers you might not know how to get hold of it. I was sorry I let you go talking to that chap in the office there—he's a bit fresh, that chap is."

"He didn't get much change out of me," said Alberta.

"Well, and how do you like it—the country, what you've seen? Of course you're new out—hardly had time to look round."

"I'm not smitten—not at all!" said Robin firmly.

Alberta tried to kick him under the table, and scratched her ankle painfully on a crooked nail.

"It's splendid," she said quickly, remembering the instructions to immigrants. "Everything's so wonderful—and so—er—so big, and so—vast—and all that. And it's so free. It's so imposing, too. A stranger can't take it in."

The visitor laughed loud.

"No, it's a deal handier at taking the stranger in," he said. "Why can't you be honest and say it's a beastly hole? You can't possibly think it's nice. What is there free about it? You just say all that rot because they've been telling you it's the way to get on with Canadians. Well, it isn't. Not with decent Canadians. And I'm an Englishman. My name's Crane, by the way, James Crane. They call me 'Jake' out here. They have a way of taking liberties with a fellow's name."

"But you can't deny it's a fine country," Alberta protested. "And there are endless opportunities for the right people to get on. Of course there are the wasters and remittance-men."

"I guess that's me," said the teamster.

Alberta thought his feelings were hurt, and hastened to apologise. "But you are laughing at me again," she concluded, and laughed herself.

They all enjoyed that primitive meal. The salt pork was pronounced a dainty of unequalled flavour, and Robin an incomparable camp-cook. Tea from a tin billy tasted like nectar, and conversation more than covered up deficiencies in the bread, which was distinctly underdone, and the milk, which was in a can and had begun to turn.

"And I suppose you know everybody in Sunshine?" asked Alberta.

"Now you're laughing at me," said Jake. "I'm nothing but a teamster, you know."

"Yes, but there are no class distinctions—I mean——"

"You thought everybody was on terms of brotherly equality, and all that kind of thing? I thought so once. When I was a kid. I've learned different. But there—I haven't got on. I must be one of the wrong sort, like you said."

Gerald hastened to explain that his sister was only talking rot, and never meant to say anything so caddish.

"I wasn't exaggerating a bit, though," Crane assured them. "This is the very first meal I've been asked to since I've been in the country. And that's nearly ten years. Don't you believe them when they say this is a hospitable country. But you won't do it yourselves when you've been here a bit longer."

"We always shall," Sally said hotly.

Jake turned to with a will to help them to make their camp more weather-proof. Later in the evening, sitting round the camp-fire that they had lighted to keep off the mosquitoes, which were spiteful that evening, they begged him to tell them his story. It was rather a sad one.

"I came out here as a lad of seventeen—and I must have had precious little sense for that, I guess. Father had been dead some years, and I didn't make much of a show at school—and Mother was short of funds for the younger ones' schooling. My next brother was miles ahead of me at books—and a clergyman's widow isn't always too well off, you know. So I was plumb-crazy on homesteading, and I worried at her

till she let me go. That was nearly ten years ago. All I've got at the end of it is my teams and a waggon—I feel pretty mad to think that's all I've got to show for the years. The mater thinks I'm in quite a big way—I tell her I'm a contractor. It sounds good, and it's true in a way. Why, I'm working on the road-grading contract right now. No need to tell her that it only just keeps me and my teams, and nothing over against the winter. I only had help from home once—a ten-pound-note to pay my hospital bill when I got sick with typhoid. I'd never have asked, but the nurses wrote home when I was pretty sick.

“Well, I started in, and I got my hundred and sixty acres, just like the books say. Thirty miles from a town, three miles from another silly young ass like myself, winter coming on, no horse, and only a month's fuel. You can't go picking up sticks on the prairie. And they don't bring coal round in bags to homesteads. Well, I stuck it out that winter, and the next summer I worked like a nigger in a construction-camp on the irrigation works. That money would have seen me through the winter, but—well, I guess I was the worst kind of a fool. A lad that's had one dose of his own company for six months naturally feels like a bit of fun before going back to solitary confinement. Towards spring my grub-pile gave out, and I had to let up. I quit my homestead, short of the six months' occupation, you see, and so I lost it. I guess it was along of that neighbour of mine. He told tales—wanted my bit for himself. That broke me for a bit. I went lumbering. I rubbed up against some fine fellows, too, and made all sorts of money—but then it all used to go when we got into town.

I'm a poor hand at saving. Still, I had it in my mind I'd prove up in the end, and I tried again. I knew more now, and was better fixed every way; but luck was dead against me. I'd have got my patent in another year, all being well, when I took typhoid. That dished me. They carted me in to hospital when they found me, but they never thought to see to my poor stock out there on the homestead.

"When I got back, my little mare was lying dead beside her colt, both dead. She was tethered. I was stuck on that mare—— Oh, say, I'm making you girls cry! I shouldn't have told you."

"Yes. Go on," said Sally, drying her eyes.

"Well, I was sick and silly, and I quit. I couldn't stick the place after that. I was pretty well broke, and it wasn't worth starting in again. You see, the fever left me as weak as a cat, and it costs something living around in rooms and feeding at eat-houses."

"Rough luck all along," said Gerald. He passed the pail of strawberry jam with a sympathetic expression. "But surely that's exceptional."

"Everything's exceptional here," said the teamster grimly. "When it hails, they say, 'Oh, but this is quite exceptional!' When it's forty below——"

"But surely it's never forty below in this Western country, is it?" inquired Alberta, alarmed.

"Very exceptionally. I tell you the honest truth now: the climate right here in Sunshine is up to any devilry you like to imagine. No matter what they say, that's right. I don't want to scare you, only to put you on your guard. I suppose you aren't intending to live in these tents after the fall, now?"

They explained that they had been recommended

to live in them all the year round. Jake shook his head gravely.

"Not the girls! Say, that's too bad. It's not fit, you know. Oh yes, people can live like that. I generally camp under my waggon right into the fall. It saves a lot. Some women live in tents—Slav women, Doukhobors—not English ladies!"

"What is good enough for other women is good enough for us. We don't mind roughing it," Alberta proclaimed proudly.

"Well, I do like your pluck. But I'd hate to think of you staying in those rotten tents. They're real punk, you know. Quite a different proposition from proper tents. I'm afraid you're going to have plenty of roughing it, as you call it, if you're not pretty well fixed for money. And you'd never have come to this dump if you were."

It was late before he snatched his hat with the spotted band, gently removed tired Rip from his knee, and jumped up from the quaint little family circle. He was reluctant to leave. The firelight danced on a ring of happy faces; the newcomers all eager and hopeful, drinking in novelty like wine.

Only on the weather-scarred face of their guest, beside whom Robin and Gerald looked almost girlishly pink and white, was written large, under an assumption of carelessness that could not fight out its memory, the sign-manual of disappointment. Alberta was watching him across the fire-glow. She saw it cross his face like a spasm of pain after a burst of hearty laughter had died away: the memory of repeated failure.

He shook hands all round.



"It's a treat to shake hands," he said. "Folks here never do it. They just hike off when they're through eating."

"Come round again, do," said Gerald. He was trying to hitch up Jake's team for him, and getting woefully tangled.

"I sure will. And be glad to give you a lift any old time." He raised the floppy hat and drove off in the empty waggon.

"How sad!" said Alberta pitifully. "And he has been somebody's quite nice boy."

"He's very nice now," said Sally stoutly. "There's no been about it."

"Rum stick!" commented Gerald. "But mind, girls, you mustn't take all that he says for gospel. I'm morally certain that he was talking sheer rot about the tents. Why, they're as sound as a bell. Practically new. And Government stuff, too!"

## CHAPTER V

### GETTING FIXED

ALL went merry as a marriage-bell on Uncle Richard's town-lots. Buffalo Camp was neatly finished with a post-and-wire fence, and Gerald had nailed up the street number, it was two thousand one hundred and four, and the name, "Buffalo Den," over the door of the living-tent. He had also made a safe for the food, and an instrument to swat the flies with. Alberta was untiring in the slaughter, and at first kept tally of the slain, which very soon topped the thousand limit; but the campaign made no appreciable impression on the multitude that turned up at every meal. There was also a plentiful supply of very bloodthirsty mosquitoes, which was odd, because none of the books had as much as alluded to them. In fact, they had distinctly stated that there were to be no noxious insects at all. "And if these aren't the noxious kind," said the disgusted Robin, who was all but unrecognisable after a night with the tent-flap open, "I should like to meet some of them."

It was surprising what a lot one found to do in a tent. One might get up in the morning with a nicely planned day before one, and find by supper-time that the main project had died a death of suffocation

under a host of unconsidered tasks, such as washing dishes, peeling potatoes and bucking wood for the fire, and carrying provisions from the town. The tradesmen declined to deliver orders so far from the trail. Cooking was interesting as an experiment, but became monotonous as a horrid necessity three times a day, when a hot sun was making the canvas shelter stifling beyond endurance.

"I begin to think this will hardly be the thing for Aunt Mary," Alberta thought, as she peeled some very stingo onions not without tears. "I wonder, I do wonder what she will say to it. Of course, it's only temporary. Perhaps, if she makes herself agreeable to those people, they'll ask her to stay a few weeks longer, until we have a proper house for her."

"I propose to start building at once," said Gerald. He was drafting a sketch plan of the house, and smoking industriously to keep off the mosquitoes. He was devoting himself entirely for the present to "domestic architecture," as he had decided that it would be false economy to do anything about finding employment when there was so much to be done at home. "I shall start with the cellar just as soon as I can get a gang of workmen to dig it. In six weeks, I calculate on having at least part of the house habitable, so that there will be no need for Aunt Mary to sleep under canvas."

"Yes," agreed Alberta, "that will be much better; and as soon as we are straight enough to arrange some proper help in the house, we will send for Aunt Mary, and she can keep house for us. I begin to feel as if I *must* be up and doing; making money, doing some

real work. Everybody works here. I can kind of feel the Great Strenuous West calling to me to take my part."

"All right! Don't get poetic," said Gerald uneasily. "They seem to want lots of women to do plain housework, according to the *Clarion*. I don't see any great demand for people like you."

"I should never be so foolish as to consult that rag," retorted Alberta. "Capable women are wanted in almost *any* capacity. At present there is no harm in Sally and Betty running wild, but I really wish they would leave off finding mushrooms. We've had mushrooms for supper every night this week, and I'm not sure they agree with us."

Gerald finished his plans that day, and took them to town.

Mr. Wrigley, the real estate agent, had very kindly offered to advise him as to the best aspect for the house to face, a problem puzzling to the novice, as there seemed to be something against every conceivable quarter.

If you faced west, you got an awful lot of dust with the Chinook, and a south aspect made the verandah useless in summer on account of the intense heat. The north position involved a cold and sunless house for the winter months, and it appeared likely that the east, the only quarter free from objection, would shortly be blocked out by a building on the adjacent corner-lot. It therefore required two heads to settle the knotty problem. Feminine opinions, said the architect, were worse than useless in such matters.

He returned to the camp rather late and very important.

"I've made a pretty good deal, Alberta," he announced with satisfaction. "I had a good talk with Wrigley, and, by the way, I managed to find out that our friend is well worth cultivating. You know, graft's the great thing out here—and if there's any going, we may as well be in it as not, eh? Well, Wrigley let drop that he's in the running for Mayor, and they're shortly going to appoint a city architect, with a fine salary attached to the post. Mum's the word! I was telling you, though, that I've closed on that corner-lot. We ought to have it. It's a good buy, if only as a speculation. This place is going to have an unprecedented boom in a few months. We shan't feel the expenditure. I've paid fifty dollars down, and the rest is in monthly instalments. It will come out of the salary. They do lots of things quite differently out here from what they do in the Old Country," he went on. "For instance, you don't sit down in a bar. I suppose you were never in such a place. Here the fellows just take their drinks standing up, and help themselves out of the bottle. It shows they must be a pretty honest lot. It costs twenty-five cents a time, but of course the rate of wages is so much higher that food costs more in proportion. And if you put it down, the bar-tender nips off with it, and you have to pay for another. I tell you, a man wants to be up to their ways."

"How very interesting!" said Alberta, and jotted the matter down in the commonplace-book she had made a point of entering such points of interest in. But she could not help thinking, "I don't like that Wrigley man. He has such a little hat, although that is an insufficient reason to distrust a man. I

wish Aunt Mary was here to speak to Gerald. He might not take a warning word from me. However, it would certainly be very unpleasant having another family hanging their washing in front of our windows, and we might even have difficulty in letting our second house, when we build it. Now we can have an east front and the sewer and water at once. I think, on the whole, Gerald showed perspicacity in securing that corner-lot."

The architect found that his plans must undergo some ruthless alteration, as he learned when he went to order the lumber that windows and doors, with staircases and other vital parts of houses, were only to be had in stock shapes and sizes, ready for insertion.

However, he prided himself on being a versatile designer, and the plan was readily adapted to Western conditions, and the order booked. The scheme for a purely Tudor effect was more or less spoiled by this circumstance, but he called it "adapted Tudor," and felt very well pleased with the final perspective. The others were delighted.

The order for building materials was carried out with admirable promptitude. To the delight of the architect, the following morning, getting up rather late, he saw the first waggon-load of dressed lumber being tipped on the site of their future home.

"That's something like doing business!" exclaimed Gerald. "Fancy one of those sleepy old English contractors getting off an order in that hustling style! I do like these Canadian business-fellows."

"I suppose this building-strike that the paper is full of won't affect a private architect?" suggested

Robin, who was reading the advertisements in last night's *Booster*.

"Oh no! There are all sorts of workmen coming into the town right now," said Gerald confidently. "You shouldn't read that rotten *Booster*. It's a Grit organ. The *Clarion*'s the only decent paper in Sunshine. I'll engage a gang to-day, and start them on the basement. Isn't breakfast ever going to be ready, Alberta?"

"I think it's too idiotic to make kettle-lids so that they fall into the kettle when it boils," said Alberta irritably. "And do you know you haven't bucked any wood this two days? I hope you are going to arrange your bedroom handy for getting up and starting the stove, that's all."

Gerald was rather less optimistic when he returned from town.

"It seems there may be some little difficulty about getting builders at present," he admitted. "However, I dare say the lumber will come cheaper on that account. There will be less demand, and that always brings prices down. The delay will also season it. Robin and I can kill time by starting on the basement excavations ourselves in the meantime. The tents are quite comfortable for the present, and Wrigley says there is no reason why the weather should not continue like this till Christmas."

"Did you bring a *Clarion*?" asked Robin anxiously. He had been constructing a hen-house with an open front after a picture in the *Western Farm Weekly*.

Gerald tossed it over.

"You have to be pretty slick getting after jobs

out here, Wrigley says; and whatever you do, don't let on you don't know everything. Go right in and say, 'Look at here! I'm I-T! You want *me*!' If the chap starts asking you any questions, say, 'Sure!' Never mind if you don't know the first thing about it. You can find out, if you've got any wit. And, anyway, you won't be a good Canadian till you've been fired a few times."

"You seem to be an authority on the subject," Robin replied, with veiled sarcasm, opening the *Clarion*. "Here goes, then! 'Wanted, men and women to learn barber trade. Tools supplied. Large demand for graduates.' 'Wanted, solo tenor for Wesley Church. Salary.'—'Can you sing?' 'Sure!' How will that do, Gerald?—'Male Clerk for ladies' and gent's furnishings—must have experience. . . . Western Hide & Junk Company have quantity of second-hand furniture equal to new, at rock-bottom prices.'"

"Just cut that address out, please," said Alberta. "There are ever so many little things we shall want about the house. I might pick something up cheap."

"Assistant used to developing and fixing. Must be a live wire. Apply Fayce & Frite, Photographers, Kingsway Avenue.' Kingsway! Fancy that name here! I'll try that, Alberta, for the dear old Captain's sake. It might be a good omen."

Alberta agreed that the coincidence was propitious, and started with him on the expedition, as the novelty of cooking and cleaning in a tent was beginning to pall.

They strolled along Fifth Avenue, enjoying the



strong, dazzling sunlight, and the newness and strangeness of everything. They looked a typical English boy and girl, Robin's quietly smart, well-worn suit as out of place as his sister's short serge skirt, simple shirt blouse, and straw hat.

"Don't these people *dress*!" Alberta observed in awe. "I almost wish we had brought a few of our decent things with us. I haven't got anything to wear but my 'Maud Muller on a summer's day' sort of thing. I never thought we should need them out here."

"You look a lot nicer as you are," said her brother stoutly. He was less critical than Gerald. "Wait till you see me blossoming out in peg-top trousers, that's all. There's Wrigley! And—my hat! What a scorcher! D'you suppose that's his wife?"

"She may be going to a garden-party, or something of the sort," said Alberta charitably. "People seem to be tremendously gay in Sunshine. She has quite a nice face, but she looks as if she had toothache."

Mr. Wrigley and his companion met them at the street-crossing,—they were wise enough by now not to attempt to cross streets save at appointed right angles where the mud was forded,—and the gay lady was introduced as Mrs. Wrigley. She shifted the toothache—it was a piece of gum, to be exact—and said that she was always tickled to death to get acquainted with the English, and invited Alberta to visit her.

"My home is on Dufferin," she said. "I'll be receiving quite soon. You'll see it announced in the

*Clarion*. I'd be real pleased to have you come around."

"She seems to be quite a personage by the way she's got up," Robin said, after they had parted. "But, of course, Wrigley is running for Mayor, and he is in the public eye."

"I think I shall go," Alberta announced. "Aunt Mary would say that it is their place to call upon us, but people are so much less conventional here than at home, and she seems very friendly."

"Here's Kingsway Avenue, and Fayce & Frite at the corner," Robin said. "I say, I feel as nervous as a cat. You might hang round till they kick me out, Alberta!"

Alberta had spied the sign of the Western Hide & Junk Company over a Chinese restaurant, and was soon happily engaged in examining the stock-in-trade. There were no hides to be seen, and the term "junk" implied a miscellany of very battered furniture and rusty stoves, with a great many little hat-racks and stools made of cow's horns. She secured a useful cupboard quite cheap, and also a pair of handsome solid brass plant-pots, similar to some which she had noticed and admired standing empty in the Merchants' Bank. These were remarkably cheap.

"I'll fit thera up with two nice spready plants at that florist's over the way. Aunt Mary will be delighted to see the room nice and artistic, and brass looks so cheerful when it is polished."

The unsavoury Dago who presided over the junk-store thought he could get the cupboard delivered, but Alberta preferred to carry her other prizes herself, as she was anxious to show them to Robin. With

one under each arm, she waited for him outside the photographer's. Robin emerged exultant from a side-door which bore the words, "Keep out! This is H—L."

"You haven't got the job?" asked Alberta incredulously.

"Sure thing!" replied Robin. "Not too bad for the first shot, eh? I'm to have sixty dollars a month."

"Five into sixty! Why, that's twelve pounds—quite a good salary, Robin! But—won't it interfere with your homesteading?"

Robin looked a little downcast. "You know, I've been thinking about things," he said. "This business is costing us a good bit, Alberta. And you never know what expenses we may have over building and the rest. I shouldn't feel comfortable to go out into the country and leave you just now."

Alberta squeezed his arm. Robin's thoughtfulness touched her. As she did so, she dropped one of the plant-pots. He picked it up and stared at it curiously.

"Where on earth did you get that thing?"

"Why, they're plant-pots. I bought them, of course. At the junk-store. Awfully cheap, too. What's the matter?"

"What d'you call them?"

"Plant-pots, of course. The man called them some Spanish name—matador, or something like that. Oh! Have you gone mad?"

The first plant-pot flew from Robin's strong arm, and fetched up in a heap of meat-tins on a vacant lot. Before Alberta could gasp her indignation, the

second was snatched from her grasp and sent to join it.

"I should think you'd have more sense," he said scathingly, "than walk along the public street with one of those things under each arm. You're not fit to be at large, Alberta!"

"But—what else are they for?"

"They provide them in bars—and places where they do drink," said Robin, "just so that people won't empty their mouths on the floor. You *are* a prize idiot!"

"Well, how should I know?" demanded Alberta. "Let's have an ice, to celebrate your first job."

They repaired to an ice-cream parlour, and enjoyed themselves to the tune of nearly a dollar with ice-cream and iced drinks of various flavours.

"The Captain said ices were awfully dangerous in hot weather," said Alberta. "Aren't they good? I really think I'll have another, if you will. I'll pay for them. I say, promise you won't tell Gerald about the—cuspidors—will you?"

It was a curious departure from the rule that Robin, usually the last to turn up for any kind of work, was the first of the family to tackle a job in the New Country. He was up at an unusually early hour the next morning, and departed over the prairie to his work while Gerald was still shaving, and the rest at breakfast.

"Robin seems quite a different fellow," said Alberta thoughtfully. "I never knew him so keen after money. I only hope he won't become absorbed in the pursuit of dollars, like so many of these American financiers one reads about!"

"I hope he keeps it up, that's all," growled Gerald. He didn't like the breakfast coffee to make its appearance on the table before him, and regarded the rapidly cooling meal as a slight. "There was no need for him to be in such a hurry to get fixed up. There's heaps to do about the place for a week or two."

Something strange and new *had* come to Robin West.

He had for the first time in a harmless but by no means useful life become actively concerned for the welfare of somebody besides himself. He is not to be set down as an abnormally self-centred and unsympathetic young man by any means. But he had never been consulted much, and things had gone along smoothly and comfortably without his troubling or exerting himself on his own or anybody else's behalf. It would be difficult to say what set his brain working as he stood one morning surveying the general view of Buffalo Camp, the uncompromising angles of the ridge-pole, the patient and untidy figures of his two younger sisters making first experiments in washing a shirt with a two-handled pail and an instrument known as a "Queen of the North." He saw the results of their labours shaming him from the line, Alberta greasily washing the greasy tin plates, and over all, the fringe of flies at the tent-flaps and the crust of flies that covered the cooking-pots.

A spirit of revolt arose in Robin.

"It's beastly!" he muttered. "It jolly well isn't good enough. I can't see Aunt Mary in this pigsty. I shall have to get them out of it somehow or other."

It was queer how the resolve came to a rather irresolute nature. It was queer, too, that he did not

at once consult his elder brother, who, after Alberta, predominated in most of their family councils. Perhaps he knew it took a lot to shake them off a cherished idea. Queerest of all, his own beloved dream had vanished into thin air, and he had hardly a regret for it at the moment. Certainly it was not for this that Robin had come to Canada, to spend his days between shop and dark-room, to be general shop-assistant and handy-man to a small photographer in a side-street of a small town. But it was equally true, as he reasoned, that neither had his sisters left their native shore to wash dishes in a wigwam, and the picture of Aunt Mary, precise and slender and dainty, presiding over such an establishment was still more unthinkable.

That undeniable fact had come home to everybody more or less when, a day or two since, Betty and Sally, returning from an extended ramble, burst in on the family with the delighted announcement that they had found a real Red Indian encampment.

"The tee-pees are *just* like ours," cried Sally. "In fact, when we haven't tidied up, our camp looks just like that. We want Gerald to paint a very long beaver, with its face and a pipe in its mouth looking in at one side of the door, and its body going round until its tail stops at the other side. There was a heap of empty tins, too, and the washing hanging out. More picturesque washing than ours, all red-and-green striped blankets and yellow handkerchiefs. They were awfully nice to us, and wanted to give us some pieces of dried fat. The old squaw let us stroke the papoose. She was a beautiful old woman really. Thin and skinny, but quite dignified.

I shall tell Aunt Mary that it is *quite* possible to be dignified in a tent."

After that, Gerald thoughtfully went and dug a grave for the empty tins, and honestly tried to reduce the camp to a less primitive state by a system of semi-military fatigues and inspections that drove Betty and Sally into open revolt.

Ways and means were a problem too. Dollars, one found, melted away like water. Four good silver shillings to lay out in provisions in Craven Bridge was a very different proposition from a dollar-bill to spend in Sunshine. And they knew from sad experience that it was hopeless to ask the flinty old lawyer who held their money in trust to advance anything on the strength of next year's income. Gerald and Alberta discussed the problem at length, but arrived at nothing very illuminating.

"It's like this," said Gerald. "Aunt Mary'll just have to make the best of it. I've written for her to stick on with those people just as long as they'll have her, and as soon as this wretched strike ends we will get a proper house to live in. Till then, we must put up with the camp. We can't afford to pay rent. Besides, we oughtn't to, on principle. Everybody owns their house here."

"If we were really up against it," Alberta suggested,—"I mean, for instance, if it came unexpectedly cold, or if Aunt Mary is tiresome about adapting herself to camp-life,—I think some of our friends would help us through. The Captain said we were to be sure and let him know——"

"No thank you, Alberta," returned Gerald proudly. "I, for one, don't choose to be set down as a remit-

tance-man. All the same, I shall feel a great deal less anxious when I have my appointment as City Architect formally made. I think my plans for the proposed City Hall ought to fetch 'em, don't you? But a good deal depends on whether Wrigley is elected Mayor. Mrs. Wrigley is at home to-morrow. I saw it in the *Clarion*. Hadn't you better call?"

The *Clarion*, being rescued from under the potato-pan, was found to contain in the column devoted to the doings of "Smart Society" the news that Mrs. Wrigley would be a tea-hour hostess at her charming home on Dufferin.

"Yes, we'll go," said Alberta. "She asked us, and she may not know that it's for her to call on us first. Besides, it would be a bit incongruous to call on a wig-wam. I'll take Betty, and we'll simply admire everything in Sunshine till they're sick of hearing us. You'd better come too, if you can make yourself fit to be seen. But people here are less conventional about dress than they are at home."

"Not if I know it! Not if it cost me the job!" cried Gerald. "But I think you girls ought to dress decently. It isn't respectful or polite to go to people's houses in any old thing."

"I suppose what was good enough for the Bishop's garden-party will be good enough for Sunshine," said Alberta, with some heat.

"After all," Betty said, with a satisfied little sigh, as they set forth in civilised attire for the first time since their coming to Sunshine,— "after all, it feels rather nice to be going out to tea in a comfortable sort of way, doesn't it? It will be quite a pleasant change to sit in a chair instead of on the side of a box."



They looked very nice, be it said, in their simple embroidered muslin dresses and soft Liberty straws, and the neat little shoes that had been jealously put away for best. And they felt nice, for they had been wearing dark print dresses made all in a piece, and chosen for utility rather than for beauty. The six-inch looking-glass in Alberta's dressing-case was not large enough to make any girl vain, but the first plate-glass window they passed told them enough to make them quite pleased with themselves.

Sally did not accompany them. She had borrowed a pony from the man that dug the graves in the graveyard about a mile away over the prairie, and was enjoying herself in her own way.

They discovered Dufferin Street after several excursions in the wrong direction. It was not easy to lose oneself in Sunshine when once one got the hang of the plan of the town. It was laid out in parallels, and each street-corner had the number on a post, and the name engraved like a tombstone on the cement side-walk. They went wrong through looking for a very superior street, with imposing residences suitable for a future Mayor to live in.

However, the little grass-plots in Dufferin Street were neat and fresh and green, and the curtains were frilled, and there were flowers in the window-boxes.

Alberta tapped with her knuckles on the gauze screen-door—there was neither bell nor knocker—and a voice from somewhere inside said, "Come right in!"

It sounded unconventional and encouraging, and they obeyed, to find themselves standing in a small lobby wondering which of three doors was the right

one. One which stood open afforded a view of a round table, set out with much plate and foliage and drapery, with the air of a miniature wedding-breakfast. They waited until Mrs. Wrigley came downstairs, her hair elaborately dressed in the latest style, and her hands busy with the back of her dress. This was of pale yellow silk, fashioned very low, and open at the neck, with elbow sleeves, and girt around with a rope and tassel that looked like a bell-pull.

She looked at her callers and gave a little gasp.

"I'm not quite dressed," she said in a disconcerted way. "Will you step in? Miss Hoaksley—Miss Wests. You'll excuse me. I'm not through dressing, you see."

She then floated upstairs again, and left the callers standing in the drawing-room—about twelve feet square, a palm and a very large piano being its chief furniture—gazing at a large maiden who reclined in a grass chair. She was attired in a very short tight muslin frock, and showed a length of well-developed leg encased in tight pink silk stockings and small black velvet shoes.

"Thank goodness," thought Alberta, "we're not the first."

It had crossed her mind that Western calling-hours might be different from English ones.

Miss Hoaksley was taking stock of them with pale, expressionless eyes from under the shade of a huge hat. Her trailing ostrich plumes nodded in all directions. They had set her down at first as a much overgrown little girl, but in Canada it is very unsafe to judge people by the length of their skirts. She wore no gloves, and the big arms suggested a liberal use of the

powder which also appeared in generous quantities on her neck and nose. She crossed her legs and said, "Pleased to meet you," in a mildly astonished tone. Betty was blushing like a rose under the scrutiny. She was also making a creditable effort to keep her face straight.

Alberta said that it was a very hot day. It was indeed so hot as to make walking a penance. They both felt quite done up after the short distance in the burning sun.

Miss Hoaksley guessed it was "prurry" hot, and shifted her gum to the other cheek. She then said that they would excuse her, and departed.

"This is a very funny way of being at home," whispered Alberta. "It said the tea-hour, and it's nearly five."

Another arrival tapped on the door, and Miss Hoaksley was heard to open it. From the scraps of conversation that floated in, they were able to gather that the newcomer was Mrs. Scran, and that she was asked to go right upstairs and get fixed. They also heard Miss Hoaksley tell her that she was to assist at the tea-table.

Betty pricked up her ears. Voices upstairs were talking about "the ices."

"I wish we could get out," said Alberta; "it seems to be quite an affair."

"I'm not going till I've had an ice or something," said Betty. "I can't walk home if I don't get something to support me."

Here Mrs. Wrigley, her toilet finished with a wide collar that ended in a tassel at the back, came in and hoped that they were not in a hurry.

"I'm sorry I can't speak with you," she said nervously. "I have invited a number of lady friends at the tea-hour, and I have the table to finish."

Betty blurted out, "It said in the *Clarion* that you were at home."

"We took the opportunity of calling, as I gathered from the paper that this was your day," explained Alberta. "Pardon my mistake. I'm sorry we cannot stay any longer, as we have calls to make in the town. Good afternoon."

"That's it. I guess you made a mistake," Mrs. Wrigley said more expansively. "Being English, you didn't understand our society ways in this Western country. I shall likely receive *formally* next week. You must come then. I'll be receiving from four to six. No, don't leave your cards. Come next week, and bring them again."

Alberta said that she was afraid she was engaged on that day, but promised to bring some more cards, and they escaped. Only just in time, for they were scarcely out of sight and earshot when the risible Betty's mirth overflowed its bounds and her laughter made Dufferin Street ring again. All the same, there was a touch of disappointment in the situation.

"Oh, I did want an ice," sighed Betty. "Let's go on to Gochon's and have some."

Alberta said it was extravagant, and Betty then conceived the plan of going to wait for Robin at Fayce & Frite's. It was near closing-time, and Robin was always game for a visit to the ice-cream parlour.

"It's going to rain, I believe," said Alberta.

"There's a queer cold wind springing up, and look how the dust blows!"

"It never rains here in the summer," self-willed Betty asserted; and Alberta started for home alone.

She felt unreasonably depressed by the termination of her unlucky call. How was she to know that it was the custom of the country for ladies to announce in the press that they were at home when they were emphatically not at home? She felt absurdly chilled and hurt and lonely, and began to wish she had gone with Robin and Betty to make merry over the incident together.

There was, as she had said, a queer cold wind—an uncanny, all-ways wind; and little spirals of dust—dust-devils, they call them in the West—were dancing in the roadway. Everything was strangely silent: not a soul was to be seen in the broad, deserted street, nothing alive save a tethered colt dragging at his picket on a vacant lot.

Then she looked round upon hearing a clatter of wheels—the unshod horses made no sound on the soft roads.

A big team of greys was swinging home at a good round trot, a tall young man with a snakeskin band around his hat standing up in the waggon.

"There's Jake! And he's going my way. I'll ride home in the waggon," she thought.

She waved her hand as the team came up with her. The driver looked at her: in the clear light she saw him half smile and check his horses. Then his face set. He flicked them into a gallop, and passed her by without recognition.

Alberta stood on the side-walk, looking after the rapidly disappearing waggon, a red spot burning hot on each cheek. She could scarcely have felt more hurt and rebuffed if she had received a slap in the face.

## CHAPTER VI

### EXCEPTIONAL WEATHER

THE teamster drove on. He did not even look round. His tired team slackened to a walk. He looked a tired, dusty labouring man. No one would have guessed that a devil was raging in his breast, a devil of discontent and disappointment, and that bitter regrets and futile resentment were gnawing under the picturesque blue overalls at the vitals of a man who had played for his school at Rugby. And all conjured up by the sight of a rather pretty, fresh-looking English girl, waving a friendly greeting to him from the side-walk.

Crane had been hauling cement that day. It is considered to be a job very specially suited for the occupation of the scores of gently-born young Englishmen who go forth to try falls with Fortune in the Canadian West. He had handled four waggon-loads since morning ; that is to say, he had lifted in and out of the waggon, unaided, something like a hundred and eighty bags, of a bulk and weight trying to the strongest and most expert dock-hand. Moreover, the bags required delicate handling, as they were apt to burst if thrown down violently. A cloud of fine-grained cement-dust rose from each as it was moved. His

throat and mouth were coated with a thick fur. His eyes smarted and ached.

His gloves were full of it, and the pores of his hot hands were choked. Across his shoulders his back ached with a dull, leaden, nagging weariness. Still, he had managed to whistle a tune before he met Alberta. There had been a pleasant plan in the back of his mind. When the last load was done for the day, he would unhitch the tired horses—they were every bit as tired and dusty as himself—and jog gently off on old Smiler, leading the other, to the main irrigation ditch south of the town. And there he would water his team, and slake their poor dust-parched coats, and strip off his own gritty clothes, and rub them and shake them clean in the prairie scrub. Then he would dive into the cool water, that would be so deliciously, gloriously wet, and swim and wallow in it, and clear his choked lungs and be clean again. But he would not drink of the irrigation ditch, for he knew that typhoid and other ills lurked for the unwary in the water that his throat was cracking for. Gloriously clean, refreshingly damp, and still horribly thirsty, he would dress, and make a bee-line for what was sure the queerest camp he ever struck, where a girl, an English girl with nice kind eyes and no nonsense about her, would give him a welcome, and possibly ask him in to tea. Sure she would ask him to tea !

So Jake whistled as he planned it all out. And looking down, whom should he see but Alberta coming out of a gate ? She looked cool and pretty and dainty ; a little bit of the great mosaic of ease and comfort and pleasant living out of which he had dropped so



completely. She had been visiting at one of the little neat houses into which he was never asked, whose inmates had nothing in common with him, poor hewer of wood and drawer of water as he was. And at the sight of her, Jake, all dusty and stained with the day's labour, suddenly saw a great gulf loom between him and the girl he had been thinking of—thinking in such a foolish, vague, simple way that he had never given his thoughts a name. Just conjuring up a picture of her in her plain print gown, with her hair rolled up quite simply, a little smut of soot across her mouth, getting tea for hungry folks in a gipsy sort of way, and not a bit proud or scornful, even of a fellow in overalls carting lumber. And yet a lady all over ; just like a fellow's own sisters must be growing up to be.

Unaccustomed stooping, they say, acts on the liver ; and this may have had something to do with the blind fury that seized poor Crane's soul at sight of Alberta. He was filled with a dumb hatred of her pretty frock, and the graceful hat and the gloves, and, crowning offence, the card-case in her hand.

He drove past in a senseless rage with himself and fate, too bitterly engrossed to feel the cold, uncanny wind that was frightening his horses and whirling papers and cans about the open prairie before him. He saw, without realising it, a great bank of cloud to the north, driving down on the town with a silent, threatening roll. Then the wind dropped, and as the dust, that had been driving across the trail, subsided, a fork of lightning cut the cloud and hung in the sky, menacing like a dagger, trembled, shook, and was gone.

He could see a ripple of terror run all along his horses' flanks under the skin ; the near-horse, which was young and not yet broken-hearted with toil, began to plunge violently. Then it seemed as if the solid earth rocked, and with a scream and a hiss, like the crack of a whip, the hail came.

Hail ! It was like goblin artillery, a fusillade of frozen violence. The sky was black with the stones, great pellets of extraordinary size, impelled with a malignant force, thrown with deadly intent.

Crane felt his right temple laid bare and the blood trickling warm, and his team, battered and terrified, got quite out of hand and stretched themselves in a mad gallop, the waggon swaying and rocking behind them. He stuck grimly to the lines, holding the maddened horses with all his weight, while the hail-stones battered through his hat and played a devil's tattoo on the crown of his head. One thought was ruling the while in his sorely cudgelled brain, the memory of the rotten place in the lines which he had "fixed" with a brass rivet. If that gave, the team would be past control altogether. It meant broken limbs very likely, and a merciful shot to end their agony. And for him that meant ruin, and beginning the weary game all over again, with his ears battered to a pulp into the bargain. And that put the girl he was thinking of just now farther away than ever. The girl——!

She would be killed——out alone——with no shelter——

Mercifully the rotten rein held : yielding to his insistent give and pull on the bit, the off-horse, old and steady, wavered a little. Crane kept his vantage manfully, hauling on their mouths, and headed for a

bit of heavy going in the old buffalo wallow where the town-refuse was now dumped. Smiler came to a standstill, flanks heaving, ears laid back in terror, and as Tommy plunged away from the pole, Crane leaped down and grabbed his head.

The instinct of self-preservation told him to turn the team head to the waggon and get under cover himself. But there was Alberta out there! Every fresh bruise made her case seem more urgent. Jake hurriedly unhitched the horses, freed them of the heaviest of their gears, and let them gallop free whither they would. They were branded, and might be trusted to find their best way out of the storm zone unaided. They had been running out of the storm. Now, peaking his coat over his head, Crane turned to face it again, peering into an impenetrable cloud of flying white bullets. Oh that she would have had sense to turn and run to the nearest house for shelter!

No, she was there! Running, staggering blindly, her hands clasped over her face, turning to right and left, as if no direction offered any way of escape. Indeed, there was none in all that howling, hail-flecked waste of grey sky and desolate prairie. The team had stampeded in a circle, so that he was not many hundred yards from the spot where he had overtaken her. She had kept on fighting blindly forward. It was strange that she had never thought of making her way back to the comparatively near shelter of the houses. She was not far from Dufferin Street, though now nothing was to be seen of the city for the thick cloud of the storm. She had a curious feeling that the place was hostile, and

that the hail, coming at her back, was an embodiment of the spirit of the place. But it is extremely doubtful whether she really thought about it at all, or did any more than just keep on her way in blind terror. When Crane threw his thick coat over her she was very far spent, and could only gasp and cling to him, fighting for the breath that was nearly battered out of her body. The haven of the sheepskin coat that suddenly sheltered her head and shoulders felt like heaven, and she let him lift her bodily in his arms and carry her to the shelter of the waggon. There they lay, panting, too much exhausted to speak, and watched the dreadful pageant of the storm wear itself to an end. A frantic horse galloped past them, an empty buggy with torn hood rocking on three wheels ; a team of mules, with a broken swingle-tree clattering behind them, headed south, kicking vindictively at the spiteful pellets behind them.

It was not surprising that the reaction of safety after the terror and solitude of the storm should break down Alberta's remaining fortitude, and she was sobbing unrestrainedly when Crane touched her shoulder gently and said, " See ! It's over. There's the rainbow ! It's done now."

Alberta just pulled herself in time from the point of breaking down into the nearest approach to hysterics of her life. She wriggled from under the waggon, with a passing wonder how she had ever been doubled up to get under at all, and rubbed her wet face with her torn and drenched sleeve.

There was a great gay bow, spanning the torn clouds from horizon to horizon, the ancient earnest that summer and winter, seed-time and harvest shall not

fail. Yet there were ruined farms and desolate wastes where the yellowing wheat had been not half an hour since ; and there was little harvest left in the course of that dread hailstorm. There was no wheat-land in sight, however, only the bare ribs of what had been a row of green-houses in the distance, now left without a whole pane of glass, all their tender green inmates and delicate flowers a pitiful ruin of broken glass and shattered foliage.

Crane picked up a small shining object which fell at his feet. It was really Gerald's silver cigarette-case, which had been appropriated as a card-case, all such trifling appointments of civilised society having been joyfully discarded before starting for the wilds. It was a flimsy little affair, and one of the hailstones had dented the thin silver. It had suffered from the storm, and Alberta had suffered too. Her thin frock clung close to her limbs, torn and limp, and through the thin veil of wet muslin there were great bruises showing, livid and red, on her firm arms.

"You're hurt ! Oh, you're hurt !" Crane cried. He took hold of her arm clumsily, looking at the bruises with a look that was almost frightened. "Oh, and it's my fault," he said. "I saw you—and I was mad, and I wouldn't stop. Because you were toffed up—and I'm nothing but a poor devil of a teamster—and a failure—and a rotter——"

It was a bungling, stupid apology that he made, standing there staring ruefully at poor Alberta's bruised shoulders, and then hanging his stupid head, while Alberta looked at him with steady, quiet eyes that had neither pride nor scorn in them. He was trying to put those hurt, angry feelings of his into words, but

he was not at all good at self-analysis, and made a sad hash of it. But Alberta understood. Her hat was woefully battered out of shape, and her ribbons soaked and torn; there was a sad drip of green dye from her once jaunty bow down the draggled muslin on her left shoulder; but her eyes were wonderfully steady and clear, Jake thought, and the clinging thin gown revealed no nervous fear in her well-poised limbs. For a girl who had just had a severe nervous shock, and a good deal of pain, she looked wonderfully calm and not in the least disconcerted, being as self-possessed a maiden as one might find on a summer day. She just let her fingers stay in his for a second, as she took the poor little card-case from him, and said gravely, "That wasn't a bit kind of you. I haven't done anything to make you think me a snob and a cad, like that. I only went out to tea. And I didn't get any, after all. Suppose you come along and have some at our place?"

She said it so frankly and looked so friendly that all the sting was gone directly, and the thought of tea became wonderfully pleasant. Crane remembered that he was thirsty.

"I only hope the others are all right," said Alberta anxiously. "Sally was out riding. Betty would be with Robin, I think. I do hope they were in shelter."

"I trust those tents of yours have stood the test," said Jake. "I thought the canvas was thoroughly rotten when you were putting them up. I'll help your brothers overhaul them—if there's anything left, that is. No good to go after my team till morning now."

Buffalo Camp was looking rather dilapidated. As

Crane fully expected, the canvas, rotted with long exposure to sun and wind, looked as if it had been riddled with bullets. The dining-tent, a long, low affair with a ridge-pole, which was evidently newer than the rest of the outfit, had fared still worse, for the pole had succumbed under the violence of the hail on the canvas, and it lay in a mangled heap, supported by the table in the middle, and melodious with the cries of the Poor but Meritorious Cat, which had been napping in seclusion under its shade. Sally, accompanied by Rip the dog, appeared from behind the ruins, safe and sound, and very well pleased with herself. The storm had caught her a mile or more from home, and Rosinante, by which name the grave-digger's bald-faced pony was dignified once a week, had bolted; but she had managed to steer him home, and he was now stabled safely in Gerald's sleeping-tent, out of which his long grey tangle of tail might be seen floating on the breeze.

The shock of returning to the deserted and ruined camp was the worst Sally had suffered from the storm, barring a few bruises: she seemed more pleased than otherwise with the excitement of it.

Gerald had not yet returned from town, having gone to show his plan to his friend Wrigley. Robin and Betty, who had been more fortunate than anybody, had been in shelter through the storm, and returned to find the work of reconstruction in full swing, Sally holding the canvas while Jake hammered in nails to hold it temporarily. Then everybody worked like niggers, till dusk came down suddenly and stopped them.

They were in a deplorable state, to be sure. They had every reason to be sorry for themselves. Strangers

in a strange land, their primitive shelter lying in a heap about their ears, bedding soaked, food drowned, the milk full of melting ice, clothes spoiled, and a crop of bruises among them that would have done credit to a family of pugilists. And yet—and yet—the rolling prairie surrounding the City of Sunshine seldom echoed to such a merry hubbub as went up from the ruins of Buffalo Camp. They made a great bonfire, and the damp bedding was steaming away before it when the hungry campers sat down to a well-earned tea. The pantry roof had gone by the board, and the bread being reduced to a pulp, they were obliged to toast it in the frying-pan. But it tasted all the better for that. The eggs being already well broken, the omelette was practically half made, and mirth and good appetites provided an excellent relish. Gerald's absence was the only drawback, as the girls were afraid that some mishap might have befallen him.

Shortly after dark, however, their anxiety was allayed by the return of the absent one, who had been under cover in Mr. Wrigley's office at the time of the storm. The plans for the City Hall had met with the prospective Mayor's approval, and he had kindly suggested a few improvements. Gerald carried the precious document to his own tent for safety while the girls made some fresh tea.

They were startled immediately after by a loud and furious exclamation, and rushed in a body to the spot, guided by the agonised oaths of a usually even-tempered young man. They discovered the future City Architect of Sunshine sitting on his plan in a puddle outside his tent.

"Oh, please forgive me!" cried Sally, all penitence.



"I ought to have told you. It's Rosinante. Did you run into him?"

Gerald struggled to his feet, and examined his bones to see if anything was broken.

"Bring a light quick! And my revolver," he shouted. "There's a man in here. I got hold of his beard—and he's nearly killed me!"

"It's only Rosinante. You must have got hold of his tail," Sally attempted to explain again. But Gerald's face was too much for her; she melted out of sight in a splutter of laughter.

"Are you really much hurt, Gerald dear?" asked Alberta tenderly.

"No-o, I think not. But I might have been," said her brother reproachfully. Sounds of subdued mirth aggravated the injury. "If my kneecap had been broken, this would have been a serious matter. As it is, I'm pretty badly bruised, but of course that's a mere laughing matter. And the plan—ruined!"

He was almost in tears. The plan looked very much the worse for wear. "And so much depends on it," he said bitterly. "It's too bad!"

Crane attempted to appease him by offering to rush off to town for arnica, and was rewarded by a dumb scowl of disapproval. But the ill-humour passed away in the enjoyment of the rôle of a wounded hero. He explained to Sally, who was really sorry, that there was a mean streak in most Indian ponies, and that they were much too uncertain for ladies to handle.

"If that animal had turned on you, you would have probably been killed, or maimed for life."

"But what else could you expect?" urged Sally,

in defence of her cherished mount. "He didn't expect you to lay hold of his tail without warning."

"I may be excused perhaps for not being prepared to find a horse in my bedroom," retorted Gerald loftily. "Perhaps you will be good enough to scrape the mud off the *Clarion*—it is rather interesting reading. You see that the Council have decided to pay me—er—that is, the City Architect that is to be"—Alberta touched wood hurriedly—"a salary of two thousand a year. Dollars, of course. Quite a decent salary for a start, though. As the population grew, it would increase——"

"Bully for you!" cried Jake. "What a thing it is to have brains! Look at me—can't do anything but work. Who'd pay *me* two thousand a year? And have you really got it then?"

"Practically. Only a matter of formalities. The appointment will be ratified after the election by the new Council."

They all pledged the City Architect in a bowl of sparkling tea, and bruises were forgotten in a fresh round of fun. It was difficult to believe that a few hours ago all these lively young folks had been looking, white-faced, on a terror of Nature of which they had not the faintest previous conception.

Gerald was just arranging to commence proceedings against the "shark" who had sold them the tents, which had turned out very rotten indeed, and Sally was passing the strawberry-jam pail to Jake, and Jake was saying, "I believe I will, after all," and they were all laughing because the Meritorious Cat had got his head fast in an empty meat-tin.

In the midst of it all, a pale, thin face under a

black bonnet appeared on the fringe of the fire-light, peering from one dishevelled and ruffianly-looking person to another, as one might recognise one's former friends and relatives in another and not a better world.

"Children, children!" said a frightened voice.

It was a small voice, but they all heard it.

"Aunt Mary!" cried five voices. Pleasure, embarrassment, surprise, concern, and alarm were all represented in that unanimous greeting.

Jake could not say, "Aunt Mary!" He simply murmured in the ear of Sally, who was nearest to him, "Guess I'd better hike!" and was gone like a shadow. He had an aunt in England, poor fellow, of quite another kidney from this gentle, faithful Aunt Mary of the Wests.

There are occasions when the sudden and unexpected appearance of our nearest and dearest inevitably fills us with other feelings than that of unmixed pleasure. It was so with the party at Buffalo Camp. There is a place for everything, and it seemed to all assembled that Buffalo Camp, in its present ruinous and battered state, was the last place in the world for Aunt Mary. It evidently struck her in the same light. After embracing her nieces, she looked around her and gasped aloud.

"Oh, the squalor!" she sighed. "You poor, *dear* children! What a dreadful place!"

"But, Aunt, you know, this is exceptional!" explained Gerald. "There has just been a hailstorm and ruined everything. You've no idea how nice it is when it's all straight. It's most unfortunate your having come just now, of all times. And, you know,

I *told* you to stay on with those people as long as they would have you. We never dreamed of you turning up here without warning. Though, of course, it's awfully nice to see you!" he added.

"Yes, it was very nice and thoughtful of you all," Aunt Mary said, sitting down carefully on the box that Robin placed for a chair. "But as soon as I gathered from between the lines that you were enduring all kinds of dreadful hardships, I came to join you at once. I couldn't sleep in my comfortable bed for thinking of you tossing on miserable straw pallets. And there were those dreadful things that came out of Alberta's cupboard—though I quite sympathise with you, Alberta dear! It *is* very difficult to keep the kitchen tidy without a cupboard."

"Who told about *them*?" demanded Alberta hotly. "It was clearly understood that nothing was to be said to frighten her in our letters."

"Oh, I may have mentioned it as an amusing incident," Gerald explained. "Besides, they have all been stoved and killed one at a time by now, Aunt. Nothing to be afraid of. You don't have to take life so seriously out here, you know."

"Then will somebody pay my cab, and put my luggage a long way from the cupboard, please?" said Aunt Mary in tones of resignation.

"Where on earth did you get a cab?"

Alberta peeped out into the darkness and groaned.

"The Stringer boy in a buggy!" she announced.

"Then you can tell the Stringer boy to wait and take Aunt Mary back to the hotel," said Gerald firmly. "She can't possibly sleep here to-night. All the beds are wet, and we shall have difficulty in

finding a dry place to sleep ourselves. And we are young and used to roughing it."

Aunt Mary agreed to this on condition that Betty, who was prone to take cold, accompanied her, and Betty was nothing loth, even though it meant making the third of an uncomfortably squeezed trio, such as is to be seen in Canada and I think nowhere else. Seating accommodation in a Western buggy is invariably provided for two, and where a third has to be inserted, you see a man sitting on the knees of two women, or a woman sitting on the knees of two men, or more often, two men sitting on one woman. On this occasion Mr. Stringer sat half on Aunt Mary and half on Betty. He took early advantage of the opportunity to remind Betty that she and her sisters had "turned him down" in Montreal. He said pathetically that<sup>v</sup> they always did, and that it was the effect of this unkindness of theirs that had sent an otherwise sober young man on the jamboree. Betty was so sorry that she said that they had not recognised him in his gloves. Then Mr. Stringer forgave the slight, and renewed his offer to take the family out driving. Aunt Mary, being of slight stature, was almost eclipsed under Mr. Stringer, who gallantly removed the weight of his person from Betty and transferred it to the older lady. But when she heard him say that the hotel bedrooms facing south looked right on the yard where he worked, and that he would sure keep the tail of his eye on hers if Betty would hang a bit of something white out to show which it was, she felt it incumbent upon her to sneeze vigorously and incessantly until the hotel was reached.

“What a *very* unpleasant young man!” said Aunt Mary.

“But it’s so different in Canada,” answered her experienced niece. “Here everybody is equal, and as good as anybody else, and you can’t keep them in their place when they haven’t got a place, can you?”

## CHAPTER VII

### MAKING GOOD

"DRIFTING into town, like the wasters and rotters!" said Gerald bitterly. He and Alberta were starting to walk after the waggon that held their household goods and chattels. They both turned to look back regretfully to where a heap of torn canvas and the abandoned cupboard marked the site on the prairie of Uncle Richard's town-lots.

"It isn't our choice, though," Alberta said consolingly, like a good sister, in the hour of defeat. "If it wasn't for Aunt Mary, we could have stuck it out in the tents till the building-strike was over. I dare say it will be more convenient for you to be closer to your work as City Architect until the tram-lines are laid."

"That," said Gerald, "is a trifling matter, as I intend to keep a horse and ride into town every day. But it will be handy to be in town until the election is over, as I have promised to help Wrigley in his candidature."

They had struck camp by common consent, after a night and day of steady rain which reduced the already storm-wrecked outfit to a hopeless pulp.

It went against the grain of the sturdy spirit of

these pioneers to abandon the simple life and go tamely into residence in a suite of rooms. The Regina Block was a square red-brick building in the principal street, which was let off into offices, and when the demand for offices was exhausted, into apartment suites. The rent of these tenement suites was about twenty dollars a month for two small rooms; and even this charge was cheap when compared with the price asked for the poorest kind of rented house, and the rooms were heated and lighted free of charge.

Moreover, Alberta reflected, there would be no need for her to waste her time about the house, and she could start in right now to make money and see life. Aunt Mary and the younger girls would be good company for one another, and the equal share of working the little home would break no backs. Sally was the most aggrieved, as she now found herself separated by two miles from her beloved Rosinante, and she gained much valuable exercise by walking to and from the graveyard, in the hope of finding that worthy beast disengaged from his daily task of drawing soil from the graves and tipping it in the coulee. Whether she was successful in her quest of a ride or no, there was thus a nice dose of exercise assured in any case.

The Regina Block was rather attractive at first sight by reason of its novelty and the compactness of the accommodation.

It was let off in suites of two rooms opening into one another, of which that opening into the passageway had only a borrowed light. It suggested one's cabin in the steamer, and was quite quaint and



delightful on early acquaintance; but experience proved it to be rather melancholy quarters to spend one's days in.

They had secured two pairs of rooms, of which that opening into the room which Gerald and Robin shared was converted into a kitchen and general living-room. Aunt Mary and the girls made pretence of being quite comfortable in the other two, of which one was laboriously converted by day from a bedroom to a drawing-room. However, as they said, one could not expect everything at first, and the experience would only make them appreciate their own nice house the better when it was built. As Aunt Mary said, at any rate there were none of "those dreadful things," and anything was better than that horrible mess. Secretly, all the young people preferred the mess of camp-life, but when a new country is calling you to be up and doing, such longings seem childish and unworthy and must be suppressed.

All sorts and conditions of men dwelt under that roof.

You might see ladies of fashion and substance, to judge by their appearance, sallying forth on social errands, and the next minute be almost bowled over on the stairs by a half-dressed, unshaved being rushing in shirt and trousers from the lavatory to his particular kennel. At all hours of the day you heard and smelt steak and onions frying, and dab-washing boiling on coal-oil cook-stoves, and heard babies crying and children quarrelling, and a gramophone with divers pianos, and several people learning to sing.

An amateur vocal quartet practised in the next room to Alberta's, and nearly drove her mad in the midnight watch.

All these people were disposed to be very friendly indeed, and a morning seldom passed without one or another tapping on the door to borrow a pan or a pot, while the borrowers were equally ready with offers to "loan you anything you need." They did not, however, satisfy the yearnings for social intercourse of our pioneers, nor appeal to the strong love of the romantic implanted in the girls' breasts.

"These people are not queer enough to be interesting," said Alberta, "and I think it is most inconvenient everybody being equal here. Positively, that odious Willy Stringer lives on the basement floor."

It was left to Aunt Mary to find the exact place of certain of these neighbours of theirs, including Mr. Stringer, and to drop them into that with a dexterity and precision scarcely credible in one so gentle and meek.

Robin, whose employer, Mr. Fayce, the photographer, was very well up in the personnel of Sunshine, found out everybody's business. He discovered, for instance, that the girls were on no account to have anything to do with a certain very golden-haired and elegant person who had said that she would be "tickled to death" to have them use her telephone, practise on her piano, borrow her "cut-glass," or take a dozen more unheard-of liberties.

There were others whom they seldom saw, and would have liked to know more of, the reticent few who gave them no chance of scraping acquaintance.

One met them on the stairs, carrying water and doing their little domestic tasks with a dignified air of aloofness that made advances out of the question. Some of them had sad faces, and looked as if they might have sad stories; others were ebulliently optimistic and what is called in Canada "aggressive" in their demeanour.

There were seven real estate offices in the Regina Block, for not more than half were residential suites; there was also an osteopathic doctor and a millinery parlour, and on the ground floor a pool-room whence astounding bangs and crashes resounded and young men stared and spat in the doorway, despite the fact that there was a plentiful supply of the brass vessels which had so pleased Alberta's eye.

Mr. Wrigley had quite an imposing window on Dufferin Street, not far from his house. In this window that gentleman and Gerald West were to be seen for several days very busy with trowels and tools and a quantity of dirt and green stuff. The result of their labours appeared at last as a model map of the Marrow Lake district, wherein Mr. Wrigley was offering fruit-farms at slaughter prices. There was a diminutive lake, real water, on which brightly lighted toy-steamers plied between little doll-houses with red walks and Noah's Ark fruit-trees. The erection of these little houses was Gerald's first professional engagement, and though he thought it might be a little *infra dig*, he was vastly pleased with the five dollars he received. The effect of this artistic advertising was very attractive to the juvenile population, but one marvelled at the childishness of trying to influence anyone of an age to invest in real estate

with so simple a device. However, it may be supposed that Mr. Wrigley knew his own business.

Aunt Mary, who was very anxious to show herself adaptable, had consented to depart from her "conventional British rule," as Alberta termed it, and call on Mrs. Wrigley, who, the *Clarion* announced, was to receive formally, this time, from four to six in her home on Dufferin.

Alberta did not think it advisable to tell her Aunt of her previous attempt to be civil to this influential citizen. Betty said that it was Sally's turn, and she and Alberta kept out of it. The *Clarion* had given a lively account of the social function at which they had been uninvited guests on a previous occasion.

"Mrs. Wrigley," it transpired, "entertained a few invited guests at the tea-hour, and was assisted at the daintily appointed table by Mrs. Scran in lilac satin with burnt-orange trimmings. Miss Hoaksley, looking girlishly sweet in a chic imported gown of palest cream chiffon with pink etceteras, cut the ices; and little Miss Olga Weekes, a dainty tot in embroidered lingerie, was a deft door-opener. A delicious lunch of *recherché* goodies was served to those fortunate enough to be present. The drawing-rooms were enhanced with potted plants and a wealth of pink and white carnations in cut-glass holders."

This time there was no fear of mistake, as the *Clarion* stated plainly that the reception was to be "formal," and Aunt Mary set forth to try her fortune in Sunshine society, with the unwilling Sally in tow.

"The woman ought to have called on me," she said for the twentieth time, "but if they think this is the proper way to behave, I suppose there is no harm in

humouring them, especially as Gerald depends on her husband to make him City Architect."

Alberta had her doubts whether it would not have been more strictly in accord with Western usage for her Aunt to make the call in evening dress, but she feared to alarm her by suggesting it.

The proceedings were very similar to the previous function recorded above. Mrs. Scran again assisted in lilac satin as before, and Miss Hoaksley was once more girlishly sweet in chiffon.

This time, however, Aunt Mary came in for a cup of weak tea and a piece of cake that it was almost impossible to get into her mouth, so fat it was, and Miss Hoaksley was kind enough to cut Sally an ice.

"And when are you going to re-ceive?" asked Mrs. Wrigley. She was, to quote to-morrow's *Booster* in anticipation, "gracious in a stunning imported gown of white embossed velvet, and looked singularly animated."

Aunt Mary replied agreeably that she was generally at home in the afternoon, and would be pleased to see Mrs. Wrigley.

"But when do you *receive*? You need to receive formally, so folks can call in and get acquainted. You must just fix a day, and 'phone up the *Booster* and have them announce it. I could loan you my cut-glass, and I'd be tickled to death to pour tea for you. Say, Mrs. Scran, wouldn't you assist at Miss West's tea, if I'm pouring?"

Mrs. Scran said, "Why, sure!"

"You're very kind, I'm sure," said Aunt Mary innocently. "I suppose I do appear to be crippled. I

had the misfortune to split my glove, which accounts for it. But in any case I have three nieces who could help me if I required assistance at my tea-table."

At this juncture Sally, who had little or no control over her feelings, crammed a great deal of her handkerchief into her mouth, and went off into a splutter. Distressed by this demonstration of ill-breeding on her niece's part, Aunt Mary took her departure promptly.

Gerald was seriously annoyed upon hearing of his sister's rude behaviour, which he said might very likely be visited on him professionally.

"You know very well how awfully influential these folks are," he complained. "A lot of good you are to a man socially!"

Robin took up the cudgels heartily on behalf of Sally who was giggling hopelessly, and his aunt who was preparing to cry.

"These people would make a cat laugh, anyway," he said. "I wouldn't have anything to do with that Wrigley outfit. Fayce says Wrigley's a Mormon. He has another wife at Cardston as well as the woman you're making up to, and that Mrs. Scran lives at the Mansions with a fellow that isn't Mr. Scran."

"This Mr. Fayce must be a most interesting man," said Aunt Mary. "Pray ask him in to supper, Robin! I should like to meet him."

"I will," said Robin. "You'll like him. I guess he'll open your eyes for you, too."

Mr. Fayce, Robin's "boss," was an old-timer, an Englishman who had come West in the days when Sunshine was a trading station of the Hudson Bay Company, with a cow-town population of under a

thousand. He was Canadian now with association and the lapse of years, from his national neck-shave to the toes of his queer-shaped boots, but he still had a fellow-feeling for an English lad, and he and Robin got on well together. Mr. Frite, the other member of the firm, was at present away in the Old Country. Robin's work was by no means all beer and skittles. He collected, or tried to collect, outstanding debts, touted for orders to make picture-postcards of people's houses, minded the shop, and made himself generally useful between times. Gerald objected that he had pitchforked himself into a business with no prospects, which was fatal to making good. But the weekly dole of dollars certainly came in very useful.

Alberta balanced the housekeeping accounts with a furrowed brow. She was very methodical.

"We shall have to do something," she decided with determination, "and that soon, or we shall find ourselves up against it."

She found the prospect rather pleasant than otherwise. Was she not in the Land of Opportunity, where dollars lay ready to be picked up by any willing worker?

She donned her most business-like attire, consulted the advertisement column of the *Booster*, and sallied forth in quest of what she called a "billet." The openings did not appear so very numerous as she had supposed. It was futile to offer herself as an experienced stenographer; she knew she would have no chance as a millinery hand used to ladies' furnishings. For teachers there was a good demand, and Betty was to qualify as soon as the schools opened. "Woman to cook for twelve harvest hands" was rather an

alarming proposition, but deciding that nothing was done without trying, she screwed up her courage to the sticking-point, and climbed a grimy stair to an office where a crowd of unkempt, elf-locked young men were lounging and chewing tobacco over a counter.

The employment agent learned her errand and jerked his thumb toward a fat, pale-faced man who was paring his nails and tilting a chair at a perilous angle.

"Here's the party," he said. The party tilted a little farther, and studied Alberta with a look of dislike.

"I would be quite willing to undertake the cooking at your farm temporarily," said Alberta. "I am considered a very good cook. I understand such work is fairly well paid."

"I guess it is, to the right party," replied the tilted one. He spoke without visibly moving his lips, or even expanding the thin slits of his upturned nostrils. "I guess you'd like that part of it vurry well."

He sniggered, then brought the chair on all fours with a bang, and fixed the applicant for the position with a furious gaze.

"Kin you cook a Canadian breakfast? Kin you bake good? Kin you dish corn in the cob? Kin you keep up four meat-meals a day for twelve men while the harvest's gettin' in? Kin you peel potatoes quicker'n lightning? And keep a cook-stove goin' fit to scare hell? An'——"

"I'm afraid I couldn't do all that at first," gasped Alberta. "I would try my best. I dare say I should get into it directly."



"I guess you kin git right now. I'll change that ad. to say 'No fool English need apply'! That makes three to-day, none of 'em any dashed good."

Alberta went out without speaking. She felt uncomfortably that someone was following her out. She was reluctant to turn and face whoever it might be, for her face was burning, and she was ashamed of having made a donkey of herself. When she did turn, she saw Jake Crane, with his snake-girdled hat in his hand. His ruddy face looked troubled.

"Look at here! You—you oughtn't to come into places like this. You—you don't need, do you? You—cooking for a threshing gang! What—what's your folks thinking of?"

"No—no, I don't need, in a way," Alberta admitted. "But everybody works here, so why not I? And we really are most frightfully hard-up! Everything is so expensive here; and we have had to leave our camp and go into rooms."

"I went there to look for you last night. And you were all gone. I felt fit to cry."

They were walking beside the city square, a space of heaped-up soil and newly planted trees with sadly drooping leaves, intersected with cement walks. There was a seat, and a few sparrows twittering in the little branches invited them to rest.

"I'm going to start in again," said Jake suddenly. "I'll prove up this time, or bust. I feel I'm going to. I've been feeling that way ever since—since I saw you."

"I'm very, very glād," Alberta said warmly. "I didn't think you were the sort of man to be beaten—not without making a jolly good fight for it."

"I've got something to fight for now," Crane said. He looked at Alberta keenly, with a glad light in his honest blue eyes.

"That does make a difference," Alberta said. She didn't know what made her look down and colour foolishly.

"Yes, I'm going to make good. I'm telling you so that you'll remember. And when you think of me, after I'm gone, you won't think of a fellow that's sort of broke, and down and out, but just bear in mind that I'm making good! I'll pull out from here to-morrow. I'm going up north, to work on the dam-site at Bassano with my team. There's all sorts of money to be made there, and I shall want a good bit if I take up a quarter-section this winter."

"Then we shan't see you again for a time?"

"Not for quite a bit. But say, think of a fellow sometimes, will you? And will you send me a line, if it's not too much trouble, to say if you're all right? And please don't go cooking for threshing gangs. You don't have to, do you?"

He looked so genuinely concerned that it was impossible to resent his interference. Alberta promised to write, and assured him that she was convinced that she would not shine as a greaser.

"I shall find a congenial opening very soon, no doubt, and when the strike is over we shall be able to build and live on our land. My brother will have a good salary very soon."

"I'm sure I hope so," said Jake. "You'll find they don't have much use for young ladies out here—only for rough, hard work, waiting in restaurants, washing-up, and house-cleaning. I can't see you as

skivvy to one of these Canadian women, I honestly can't."

"But in Canada," quoted Alberta,— "in Canada, the mother's help occupies a unique position in the household, and is honoured and respected by the whole family."

"Is she?" said Crane. "Don't you go and be one, or you might find different."

He caught Alberta's hand and held it for a minute, looking into her eyes, smiling with his eyes, though his mouth was set almost sternly.

"I hope—whoever you strike—they'll be kind to you," he said. "You'd always be kind—kind and gentle and dear. Good—good-bye, Alberta!"

Alberta smiled back unsteadily.

"Good-bye and good luck!" she said. Jake strode away, not to spoil parting by too long dallying.

His eyes had told Alberta more than his words.

"He's different," she said to herself, watching him with dimmed eyes. "He's quite lost that hard, disappointed look he had. He's happy—and it's sort of because of me—so—so how can I tell him—or even make him think—that I don't care?—not when he's going away—feeling hopeful and happy—and because of me. I suppose I ought to have let him know that I don't feel like that—but I couldn't. I wonder if it was wrong?"

So much can be conveyed without the use of clumsy words. He had said not a syllable more than is set down, Alberta had responded by no more encouragement than is recorded save for the emphasis of a kind look, the tender accent on a word of sympathy.

But she had read aright what is indeed impossible for any girl to misread, and pity had dictated a message

in answer which her honest heart would have condemned as a falsehood if her lips had framed it into speech. Perhaps it was just as well.

She went next to the *Booster* office to insert an advertisement. Her intention was never to be carried out, for while there, chance threw in her way just such an opportunity as she had read of in the pages of fiction, and she "snapped" it on sight.

She was composing an alluring description of her own accomplishments, with suggestions from the young man behind the counter.

He seemed to think she was not much good.

"What *kin* you do?" he asked patiently. "S'no-grapher?"

"No, I wish I was," confessed Alberta. "I think I'd better say 'any capacity.' And 'experienced.' Yes. Put 'experienced.'"

"Oh, say! Wait right there!" exclaimed the youth. He took a piece of gum out of his mouth, dabbed it under the desk for safety, and ran upstairs, returning shortly with nods and becks, and directed her mysteriously to "go right up."

Alberta did so, and found herself in a small, untidy room, heaped with papers, a pot of gum, a huge pair of scissors, and a long, pale man with red-rimmed, weak eyes and a long neck. He looked very like a pair of scissors himself.

"You've had some noospaper experience?" asked this person.

Alberta had just sufficient presence of mind to say "Sure!" with almost unnecessary fervour. She compounded with her conscience with the recollection of the school magazine.

"We paid the last gurl thirty dollars a month. But she was a *vurry* smart gurl. Yes, there was some class to that one, there certainly was. S'nographer too."

Alberta said that she would learn to be a stenographer as soon as she could.

"You couldn't do better," said the editor of the *Booster*. "Attend a course. Start in at once. It will make you wuth something. A gurl that's not a stenographer is wuth practically nothing."

A few minutes later Alberta went down the dingy stairs, feeling not quite sure whether she was on her head or her heels. She had a dim consciousness that she had been offered and had accepted an engagement at twenty dollars a month to write up the daily "Social and Personal" column for the *Sunshine Booster*. She had promised to "get around," "get acquainted," and "get busy" at once, and to attend social gatherings, describe in detail the toilettes of the *Sunshine* ladies, and write up personal paragraphs about everybody who was engaged, married, or died, for the edification of the public.

And she was to have a rise when she had mastered stenography sufficiently to take the correspondence of the office in addition to her other duties.

"You'll take a notion from the last gurl's stuff," said the editor. "Vurry smart gurl, she was. She's getting a hundred a month right now, in Calgary. Mike'll put you in the way. You'd best get busy on the 'phone right now." There's a big function at ex-Mayor Biscuit's to-night. See you get in a dandy spiel on that."

The youth in the office, who was mail-order clerk, general accountant, and occasional compositor on this

remarkable journal, proceeded to initiate Alberta into her duties forthwith. It was getting late in the evening before she was able to tear herself away from her delightful new occupation to rush home to inform her anxious relatives that she had actually found herself a niche in the ranks of professional journalism.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A KEEPSAKE

EARLY in the pearly, prairie morning, almost before the meadow-lark in the short scrub had begun his twittering, fluttering salutation to the dawn, while the pink flush was not yet faded from the snow-capped Rockies on the western horizon, Sally slipped out of the Block, past the sleepy janitor scrubbing the stairs, and away on fleet feet out of sleeping Sunshine towards the morning. She carried a little quirt, and wore a divided skirt of home-manufacture, by which the reader may guess correctly that she was bound for the graveyard and Rosinante. Rip trotted at her heels, his short tail a-wag, his black nose inquisitively sniffing, an air of unappeasable curiosity about his whole busy little person.

Rip was a yellow dog. He possessed, as his proud owner had assured the lenient customs-official at Montreal, the half of an excellent pedigree, his mother having deviated sadly from the narrow path of virtue. He also carried added dignity by virtue of being now an imported dog. He had cost about five pounds to import, to be exact, which gave him a distinct money value which he could not previously lay claim to. For the fact

remains that, loving, faithful, shaggy, short of tail, very long of tongue, Rip was, first and last, a yellow dog.

Gophers, in this strange, ratless country, were a new delight, and he chased madly after each bright-eyed little creature that sat up saying its prayers at the door of its house as they sped over the prairie towards the forlorn little God's acre by the side of the coulee. No one was stirring, but the pony, all silver in the morning light, was grazing peacefully, and was so surprised at this early visit that he suffered himself to be caught before he realised Sally's intention. The old saddle was handy in the shed where the grave-digger kept his tools, and very soon all three, Sally, Rozinante, and Rip with torn ears flying wildly, were careering over the short grass of the rolling knolls that sloped down to the river towards the ford. You could see where the ford was by the wheel-ruts that wandered to it along the green bottom of the coulee, and over the half-dried bed of the backwater, that lay stagnant and muddy at your feet. Not till you were at the very top of the cutbanks looking down into the river could you catch a glimpse of the great silent power that had been making its stony bed through the ages deep, deep in a wide hollow between the steep banks.

It flowed there, silent, dull, opaque, without a ripple, without a murmur. At first you thought you did not hear its presence at all ; then you became aware of a steady, monotonous pouring, so low and lifeless a sound as to be almost inaudible. The water was not clear, but of a yellowish brown, with a curious lithe motion in its steady flow. You scarcely saw that the



flood moved ; but the few leaves that had already succumbed to the first touch of the fall, lying on its surface, floated on and out of sight with a terrifying rapidity.

Sally put her pony at the ford, and the clever little beast carried her through sturdily, though the water was up to his withers and he had difficulty in keeping his feet in mid-current.

She shut her eyes half-way across ; there was quite half a mile from bank to bank, and the muddy water showed no bottom ; but Rosinante floundered into shallow water and plodded on patiently through the sticky shallows till he stood firm on the shingly beach. It was more like sea-shore than river-side, with its smooth pebbles and silver sand. A long, low island wooded densely with cottonwood, and low, scrubby flowered undergrowth of various kinds, straggled as far as the next bend of the river, between the sluggish backwater and the full flood. Here growth was plentiful, and leaf and flower were refreshing to eyes tired of the scant vegetation of the semi-arid plain ; but a glance told that it was growth for a generation only, not meant to last. Where any tree had reached a stature above its puny fellows, decay had already set in ; and the stony ground, between to-day's profusion of shrub and flower and berry, was strewn with the dead trunks and limbs of yesterday's trees. A magpie flapped with a harsh cry, from a tree near by, and Rosinante, old and staid, managed to shy at the sudden sound, as the bird steered a zigzag course over the cutbank across the river.

“ One for sorrow ! ”

Sally trembled a little as she set down Rip, whom

she had ferried over in front of her saddle, being fearful for the safety of that cherished little friend. She looked in vain for a second for the ill-omened bird and felt suddenly, amazingly alone.

The high, green, sloping coulees shut off even the desolate freedom of the prairie ; not a sight or sound of human habitation was there. She shook up the pony, and followed the rough, winding trail till the summit was gained, on the farther side.

From here the river lay far below at her feet, and she breathed more freely to be away from its baleful solitude. The green islet was now a mere toy islet, set in a muddy lake. Up here the trail was distinct and well marked. A wide, hoof-trodden, grassless patch marked the meeting-place of three trails—that which had forded the river, and one, following the opposite bank, from the traffic-bridge some miles to the south.

Here Sally halted, and waited with her eyes fixed on the southern trail, where it vanished over the shoulder of a rising bluff bordered with a post-and-wire fence. She had laid her plans with a consideration and deduction that would have been creditable to a highwayman. In a few minutes there hove into sight a team trotting gaily with a light load behind. Sally waved her hand and galloped to meet the moving blur that her sharp eyes had sorted out into team, waggon, and driver ; and the astonished Jake pulled up in amazement.

“ Oh, Jake, don't you know me ? ” faltered Sally. “ I came to meet you. Alberta said you were going. And I knew you must come this way. So I came to meet you, to say good-bye ! ”

"It's awfully good of you," Crane said, and coloured furiously.

"I didn't want not to say good-bye," Sally repeated, rosy-red. "And I brought you Rip. Will you have him? They won't let us keep him in the Block."

"It's awfully kind of you," stammered Crane. "But—I mustn't take him from you—you're fond of him——"

"We love him," Sally gulped. "But we should have to part with him. Alberta said last night she'd have asked you to have him if she had thought of it. He's Alberta's dog really, and we all love him. He's a darling, and he can sit up. He's a pedigree dog on one side, you know. We'd like *you* to have him. And when—when you get to love him, you'll remember, won't you, that I—that we—loved him too? He's splendid at tricks. He'd be an excellent retriever if he didn't bark such a lot."

"Did—did Alberta really want me to have him? He's her dog, isn't he? I *would* like him awfully."

"Oh, I'm so glad," said Sally. She jumped down and kissed the little dog's black, moist nose.

"He—he was all our dog," she explained. "We all love him."

"It's really very kind of your sister," Crane said. He took the little wriggling beast in his arms. He was thinking how he had seen Alberta hold him and caress him. "I'll treasure him like anything. And thank you ever so much for coming to see me off like this!"

He pulled off the big teamster's glove and held Sally's hand in his. But she looked down, and

fumbled in the dog's shaggy hair, where a big tear was hiding itself among the curls.

"G-good-bye," said Sally, and pulled her hand free.

"Oh, I say,"—Crane had his slouch-hat in his hand,—“she liked this old thing—will you give it to her? Ask her to keep it—just for a token that Rip's in safe keeping.”

He unbuckled the snakeskin band that was round his hat, and laid the queer spotted thing across the pony's neck. They had all been examining and admiring it on the night of their first meeting.

“You'll thank her for me—and give her that—and say good-bye again for me—and God bless her!” jerked out Crane.

“Yes. I'll tell her. Good-bye! *Good-bye!* That's from me,” Sally added in a low voice, and looked at him reproachfully.

Jake was bending over the dog, and missed both the look and the word. As Rosinante sidled down toward the river bottom, he shouted to her to be careful at the ford; and Sally did not again look round though she was conscious that he was waiting, anxiously watching for her safe crossing. Once across, she waved her hand, and galloped away, the yelps of the deserted Rip sounding faintly in her ears.

“He's gone right out of my life—right out of my life!” Sally was saying to herself. “And he doesn't care. And Alberta doesn't care that he's gone out of *her* life.”

She did not allude to Rip, it is as well to mention.

Breakfast was over when Sally got back to the Block, and the different members of the household

had gone to their vocations ; but Aunt Mary, who was specially fond of Sally, brewed her fresh tea and fried her more griddle-cakes.

" Did you find a home for poor Rip ? " asked Aunt Mary.

Sally knew that the whole world that took the trouble to look at her tear-stained cheeks and swollen eyes could see that she had been crying, and hoped that her Aunt would put it down to distress at parting with Rip. Whatever Aunt Mary did think, she said nothing, but her manner, as she handed her the maple syrup, was soothing and sympathetic.

The remains of an Old Country mail were scattered over the breakfast-table ; letters left lying open, after the manner in families of young people whose correspondence is largely public property.

" There's a letter from the Captain," said Aunt Mary. " He says he thinks of going abroad in a few months. He must be missing you children."

Sally read Captain Kingsway's letter, and then put it together in the envelope with a kind of shocked respect. There was nothing much in it. Anyone might have read it ; indeed, any of that family might have been the intended recipient. He asked after the dog ; hoped they had the filter attached to their drinking supply ; mentioned that Potts, the old keeper, was confined to his bed with rheumatism ; advised the boys not to rush into homesteading without due consideration, and on no account to take the " little girls " out into the wilds. A boy-friend had left the village, and the place seemed appallingly quiet and deserted, with all the birds

flown. There had been heavy rains and the young pheasants had suffered. He had hoped to hear of their progress, and begged for a letter, even if it were only a short one. And he remained Alberta's old chum and constant friend.

It *was* Alberta's letter, though it might have been for anybody else, and Sally folded it away, as we have said, with a shocked respect.

One loves and learns: Sally knew that *she* would not have left it open for public perusal.

"Alberta thinks," said Aunt Mary, "that it is quite unnecessary to have the filter affixed. She says the water supply is quite healthy, and she has been told that the brown sediment has certain positively nutritious properties. But I must say I should prefer to have a little less nourishment in the water. I always thought Captain Kingsway a very sensible man. He writes very urgently about the filter. I shall persuade Robin to affix it."

Sally accordingly unearthed the filter from the bottom of a packing-case where it had been stowed away, and set it on the table with the hammer and gimlet and two screws ready for her brother to fix up when he came in.

Unfortunately, Gerald happened to pop in for lunch that day, and his eye fell on the filter at once.

"Um'h'm!" he said in his best Canadian accent. "So somebody's getting scared with the typhoid bug-a-boo?"

As has been related, Gerald was deeply interested in the municipal elections then in progress, and his zeal had thrown him a good deal in the society of typical Sunshine business-men. His progress in the

manners and speech of his adopted country was almost marvellous. He pointed impressively at the filter.

"Do you know that everybody that wants to knock the water supply goes in for one of those filter outfits? And mind, if you knock the water supply you knock the city! Sunshine don't want knockers. We want Boosters. You folks need to boost all you know!"

"But really!" Aunt Mary observed in some alarm, "I'm afraid I shall never be a Booster. It sounds hardly a nice thing for a lady."

"You cert'nly won't, at the rate you're going on," said her nephew bitterly. "Wrigley'll put you up to some boosting wrinkles. I've asked him in to supper to-night. He's rather a rummy beggar, you know," he added as he went out. "You needn't throw a fit if he has a jag on."

He was obliging enough to give a few brief directions as to the diet of Canadian real estate agents and prospective Mayors, and the correct method of serving same. Aunt Mary, assisted by Sally and Betty, followed the instructions to the letter. She thought the result rather an odd meal, but as Alberta would have told them, at Rome you must do as Rome does.

A T-bone steak was duly procured and cooked exceedingly; a pile of hot cakes made, plates of bread-and-butter very thick, potatoes served in a number of little saucers, a can of pears emptied into a dish, and the perennial teapot. The spoons and forks were placed, bowls up, in a tumbler in the middle of the table—Gerald said this mode was *de rigueur* on Canadian supper-tables. It was almost providential, in one sense, that Robin, quite without warning, elected to

bring in his "boss," Mr. Fayce, to introduce him to the family. It was a killing of two birds with one stone, since the one preparation did for two guests ; but they remembered with some trepidation that Mr. Fayce had expressed to Robin no great opinion of the would-be Mayor.

It was a pleasant surprise to Alberta, on returning from her journalistic duties, to find quite a little party in progress, as she happened to be short of material for her next day's "Society and Personal."

Betty drew her aside to whisper mysteriously.

"Be awfully careful not to mention Mormons," she spluttered. "Mr. Wrigley is one himself! Isn't it romantic?"

Alberta replied guardedly that it was very wrong, according to the tenets of the Church of England, and cogitated a paragraph which was to begin: "All shades of political and religious opinion assembled round the daintily appointed table," etc.

The evening being rather chilly, Mr. Wrigley, who was the first to arrive, was wearing a large fur-coat and wedge-cap. Aunt Mary began the evening badly.

"Won't you hang your jag behind the door, Mr. Wrigley?" she said.

Gerald frowned savagely, and the visitor, who was really more sober than he had been for a week, looked hurt ; but Aunt Mary was only puzzled by the sour looks she had unwittingly evoked.

The meal was a little constrained. Aunt Mary was obviously trying to remember all she had heard about Mormons, and trying not to look shocked. Mr. Wrigley had speedily recovered his good-humour, and was urbane and anecdotal. He ate a great deal of



butter. He told several stories about "green Englishmen" with an offensive trend, and enlarged on the enormity of English investors keeping real estate out of the market.

"Right here, right now, in this Western country, where we're sitting," said Mr. Wrigley, "there are lots—town-lots wuth three or four thousand dollars each—tied up to make a fortune for folks in London, England, that have never spent two-bits in the place. Yes, siree!"

Here Betty's patriotic fury exploded.

"They must have paid for the land, or lots, or whatever you call it in the first place," she protested. "There wouldn't be much Canada to brag about without English people and English money, and I'd rather have some English people making a good thing out of it than a lot of Doukhobors and Slavs and Mormons."

You could have heard the proverbial pin drop.

Gerald adjusted his eye-glass to fix the offender with a cold, reproachful stare; and Mr. Fayce tactfully tried to change the subject.

"It doesn't always follow that real estate is paid for when it changes hands," he said. "I've seen it paid for in very funny ways. There was an old-timer around here, for instance, some years ago—poor old Dicky Carless——"

"Dicky Carless!" cried Alberta. "Oh, Mr. Fayce, that would be Uncle Richard, I'm sure! Fancy you knowing him! We've simply longed to meet somebody who knew him in the pioneer days. Mr. Wrigley only knew him very slightly in a business capacity. He must have had a great faith in the future of Sunshine.

He invested in town-lots here, and left them to me in his will."

Mr. Fayce suppressed a snicker.

"Great tall chap? Reddish hair'n whiskers? That's Dicky," he said. "The best poker-player I ever struck was Dicky. I was just going to tell you about those town-lots of his. You never saw a man with such luck at cards as he had. I guess I'm a dandy at poker, but for straight bluff Dicky had me skinned a city block. I'd been losing pretty heavily one night, but when I found myself staring at a full house I thought it was safe to go some. I'd parted with my bottom dollar already, and I meant having some back. Well, I thought a full house looked good. My luck had turned. I called for jack-pots, and threw in a town-lot I'd bought for a snap two days before. Well, Dicky had amazing luck, he sure had. But that time it seemed to have failed him. He acted looking real sick, and I risked it and raised with the other lot. I didn't think much to that bit of real estate anyway. When it came to a show-down, the artful old fish laid down a Royal Flush and—well, I guess that's how you came to inherit those two town-lots on the Duff addition."

"Oh—h!" breathed Alberta. "So—so—I don't know much about poker—but—you mean that Uncle Richard won the property in a game of poker?"

"He sure did—and by as pretty a piece of bluff as ever you saw. But you needn't think any less of your lots on that account. They'll have a value some day right enough. It's only a matter of time."

Mr. Wrigley leaned over the table, and put a large piece of butter in his mouth with a fierce expression.

"There's a value to those town-lots right here right now. You bet your sweet life there is! There's a value to town-lots in any part of Sunshine. We've got a vurry fine city here, let me tell you. And a city that's going ahead. We've gotten the most fertile country in the world here. We've gotten water-power, we've gotten two railways operating and three more that will materialise very shortly; we've gotten the Shoe-shine industry located right here; and other manufactures will come! The world's got its eye on Sunshine. Sunshine ain't got no use for folks bumming round an' trying to knock the city. No! We want boosters. Boost first, last, and all the time."

Mr. Fayce said, "Rats!"

He was rather a curious mixture, this Mr. Fayce. By turns, he was Canadian to the finger-tips in speech and manner; then suddenly the mask would drop off and the Englishman would stand revealed, just as he had come, years ago, to seek his fortune in the wonderful West. Since that day a certain cynicism had crept into his attitude, born of disappointment and disillusionment.

"What we do want is to tell the truth and shame the devil," he said. "How can any place expect to prosper that is built up on a basis of deception and fraud? It's a rotten, bad system, and only disgusts people with any sense."

Mr. Wrigley ignored the knocker with studied contempt.

"Here in Sunshine we boost on thoroughly scientific lines. For instance, we have just organised a round trip, chiefly through my efforts, I may say, to tour England and the Continent for the express purpose of

boosting Sunshine. The city will be represented by its best boosters and publicity men in the centres of the world, and a tremendous influx of settlers and of capital is expected to be the result."

"I should think the effort will have the effect of making a lot of folks stay at home, which will be a good thing, for them at any rate," said Fayce.

Mr. Wrigley became infuriated and personal, and intimated that when Mr. Fayce found himself "down and out" he would perhaps think better of knocking the city.

Agitated by his truculent appearance, Aunt Mary tried to relieve the strain by tactfully changing the subject.

"Gerald tells me you are from Ontario," she said, turning to Mr. Wrigley, "and that you positively had to cut your way out to get here. Do tell us about it! I'm sure you must have had some most interesting experiences."

There are occasions when it is unsafe to repeat phrases heard of a person to that person. The question "When did you cut your way out?" is the last word in affront to a native of the Canadian backwoods.

Gerald had certainly told them that Wrigley had "cut his way out" from Ontario, but he is to be excused, under the circumstances, for putting his toe down gently but firmly on his Aunt's small foot beneath the table on the conclusion of this innocently pleasant piece of conversation.

So unconscious was she of offence that the rebuke was wasted on her.

"Guess I'll hike," said Mr. Wrigley abruptly, with a toothpick in his mouth. "G'bye!"

He struggled into his fur-coat and was wandering out without shaking hands.

There was an awkward pause. Then—

“What a beautiful jag you have on!” Aunt Mary remarked, to cover it up. “Both you boys must get jags. Does it cost very much, Mr. Wrigley?”

“I’m coming too,” said Gerald desperately. “Few things to see to at the Committee-meeting.”

“He said he was going to hike,” whispered Aunt Mary. “What is it? Will he do it outside?”

“He’s done it,” said Gerald. “That’s hiking! And I do wish you wouldn’t injure my prospects with saying such awfully silly things!”

He fled after the enraged Mr. Wrigley. Aunt Mary turned to her nieces with tears welling in her eyes.

“I suppose it’s etiquette in Canada to hike as soon as you’ve finished,” she observed.

“No, it’s not,” said Mr. Fayce. “Wrigley’s a rude hog. If you knew half the things I do about him you wouldn’t have him around with these young girls.”

“I’m afraid he has a great deal of influence,” said Aunt Mary, shaking like a leaf. “I’m sure I’d no idea of annoying him in any way.”

“Influence!” laughed Mr. Fayce. “Not a bit of it. He’s putting up for Mayor because there’s a salary attached to the post, and he stands as much chance of being elected as that chair. Wait till next week and you’ll see who’s down and out. That’s the type of man,” he continued, “that gives Canada a bad name. A detestable, impudent, blatant, evil-living, ignorant scoundrel! It’s these real estate men that are keeping the country back. They’re a blight on the face of the earth. And they’ll go through you like

a knife, as you'll find if you are foolish enough to have anything to do with them. If you ladies have any money to invest, I beseech you, give friend Wrigley a wide berth."

Alberta thought of the corner-lot, but she said nothing. Their silence must have been eloquent, for Mr. Fayce laughed again, and said that they would be thinking him a Job's comforter. He stayed late, telling them Indian legends, of which he had a great store, and helped the girls to wash up the supper-things, a mark of consideration which pleased them vastly, and was a useful object-lesson for their brothers.

"Perhaps it will be as well," decided Alberta reluctantly, when they were alone, "to keep it out of the *Booster*. Mr. Fayce seems to think Mr. Wrigley is rather a questionable person. But it is a pity, as it would have made a nice paragraph. However, we will select our guests more carefully next time. I'll just mention that we entertained a few friends privately at the supper-hour in our cosy suite of rooms. I could say that the girls looked sweet in their organdie muslins, and that Aunt Mary presented a distinguished appearance in her Shetland shawl. You really do, Aunt Mary dear," she added, kissing the smooth parting of her aunt's grey hair. "But you do say the most awkward things at times."

It was late when Gerald came in. He sat down and began to take off his boots in front of everybody, a thing he would not have dreamed of doing in England.

"What are you looking so black about?" asked Betty.

"Oh, nothing!" Gerald replied bitterly. "Nothing.

Only my chance of a good thing gone by the board. Nothing to worry about. I'm not kicking ! ”

“ Whatever has happened ? ” cried Alberta, trying to remember where her brother kept his razors.

Gerald showed his knuckles, which were raw and bleeding, and told Sally, rather rudely, to hurry up and find the court-plaster out of the first-aid outfit they had brought with them.

“ These Canadians can't use their fists for nuts,” he said complacently. “ Of course, if a fellow calls a fellow's aunt an old gink, there's nothing for it but to give him a smack in the jaw. He went down like a ninepin. It's all up with my chances of being City Architect. I just hope the bounder doesn't get elected now.”

“ Oh, how sorry I am ! ” sobbed Aunt Mary. “ What is an old gink ? These people use such strange expressions. He may have meant no offence. Perhaps—perhaps I *am* an old gink ! You are always so hasty, dear Gerald, and chivalrous to a fault.”

“ I must own,” Gerald said judiciously, “ that you did say some decidedly ginkish things this evening. But I don't allow a fellow like Wrigley to call an aunt of mine an old gink, whatever my own opinion may be. No doubt I shall find another opening. I can work on the sewer, or join a lumber-camp.”

Aunt Mary said, sobbing, that she would sooner be called a gink in the *Sunshine Booster* than have her brave-spirited boy reduced to such an occupation ; and Gerald forgave her, and kissed her.

## CHAPTER IX

### LOOKING ON

"Now that I am about to mix with Canadian Society in a kind of official capacity," said Alberta, as she started for the *Booster* office in much elation of spirit, "we shall very soon have a chance of meeting with the really nice people. Life will be very different, particularly when we get in touch with the homely, hospitable, generous type of Canadian."

"You will have to get some decent dresses if you are going to be so gay," suggested Aunt Mary. Alberta said that in Canada nobody troubled about dress. She had said this so often before she got there that she said it now more from force of habit than anything else. She had certainly seen enough of Sunshine by now to know better, and her thoughts were busy with the problem of adapting an outfit designed for strenuous, open-air Colonial life to the demands of a gay social round.

Her duties did not appear at first very arduous. The *Booster* delighted its readers, or rather the feminine portion, with accounts in detail of what Sunshine accounted Society. As befitted a democratic Society, where social distinctions were merged in the common exaltation of citizenship, all and sundry availed them-



selves of the pleasures of publicity, and Alberta's business was to note down the doings and wearings of nobodies and such small notabilities as the place boasted, mostly through the medium of the telephone. The ladies showed no false modesty, but poured into her ear the descriptions of their "imported" gowns and hats, and the deliciousness of their midnight "lunches," with great eagerness. She found herself invited, moreover, by reason of her capacity as "Au Fait" of the *Booster*, to certain "pink teas" and bridge-parties, which heralded the social season proper, which was to open shortly with a dance in the Masonic Hall. At this function the "fair young daughter" of a local magnate was to be presented, to whom not being specified. It was all very strange and crude, and quite socially impossible; but it was a change, and Alberta enjoyed the fun of looking on at the antics of these Western ladies in their efforts to ape smart Society. She had a feeling all the time that there did exist a circle, quite apart from this whirl of trivial amusement, of sensible people of sufficient taste not to court this vulgar publicity. It was borne in upon her that at the doors of what few cultured women Sunshine boasted, poor "Au Fait" with her notebook would not be a welcome visitor, and the stream of eager information would not be forthcoming.

But the *Booster* wanted to pry into none of their business; there was copy and to spare, often too much, indeed. On the occasions when the mud was sufficiently disgusting to keep the Sunshine matrons at home, it was an understood thing that the slim column should be filled out with an appropriate quotation from the *Poets' Birthday Book*, which with the *Canadian*

*Almanac and Selections for Every Day from American Authors* formed the library of the *Booster* news-room.

It is not our purpose to drag the reader round with Alberta from one to another of the neat little "homes" all set out in order for the monthly reception. Suffice it to say that the novelty of it very soon wore off, and our young journalist found herself heartily sick of sitting on the corner of a sofa for an hour, nibbling a bit of cake and observing what the women had on. It was all very dull, though there were plenty of smart frocks, and those who were dowdy but important had to be made to appear smart in print. She very soon had all the jargon of Western gaiety at her finger-tips. She knew that it was proper to serve lunch at the midnight hour, and had already learned the grave distinction between a lady at home and a tea-hour hostess.

On "at home" days prodigious efforts were made.

Potted plants were hired from the florists, a dozen or so carnations were grouped in the cut-glass vases. The houses were not adapted for large throngs, the majority having only a small dining- and drawing-room divided by a sliding door, and a tiny kitchen. From this little domain all traces of family habitation were rigidly excluded. Chairs and china were borrowed from neighbours, and a ridiculously self-possessed little girl, nearly all stiff bow and short white frock, was stationed at the door as a "dainty door-opener." The friends of the hostess shared with her the onerous duties of "receiving." One invited to the tea-room; a second cut ices at a side-table; a third poured tea; a fourth dispensed the tea-hour

trifles. If there was a piano, still a fifth entertained the company with selections. The number of callers was a doubtful quantity, but the multitude of assistants kept things from falling flat, and everything was eaten up. Tiny frilled muslin aprons were worn by the hostess and her staff, over very elaborate costumes. Frequently an honour-guest was the "*raison d'être* of a smart gathering." All those who had lent china, spoons, or chairs made a point of being present, and the event being announced beforehand in the *Booster*, all of Sunshine that felt disposed rambled in, drank a cup of tea, and rambled out again, feeling thoroughly in the swim. After all this gilt of preparation and form is removed, the gingerbread fact remains that the women took tea together much after the immemorial custom of women, save that the tea was usually very weak, the cakes very scanty, and the ices very runny.

Alberta thought that the ladies neither gave nor received anything very adequate in the way of substantial hospitality. They were, however, prodigal in the distribution of pasteboard, which they handed out regardless of expense.

She attended meetings of the Women's Civic Club, at which overdressed matrons met to discuss subjects for the benefit of the community. The topics selected were of a nature not usually chosen for discussion in polite society, and these ladies of Sunshine moved and passed the most hair-raising measures of legislation without turning a hair, while poor English Alberta, less up-to-date in her notions, listened, crimson to the hair-roots.

Under all this feverish round of trivial frivolity

there lay plenty that was not a little pitiful, though it did not strike the observer at first sight.

Much has been written of the chivalry displayed towards the fair sex by Canadians, and of the good times enjoyed by Canadian girls. The fact remains to be set down in cold print that there is no woman more to be pitied than the wife of a typical Canadian in a typical Canadian town of the Middle West.

The climate of Southern Alberta has properties peculiarly trying to women and young infants; the strain of living in an atmosphere three thousand feet above sea-level is a handicap to all but the most robustly constituted. Sudden and drastic changes of temperature are another feature of the Alberta climate, and the women have developed the habit, necessitated in cases of delicacy or illness, of remaining for the greater part of the year inside houses heated up to about seventy degrees. The dry heat and lack of fresh air has withered their roses and wrinkled their cheeks; the slight, piquant, dark-eyed girls are past the corner and on the way to old age at the time when girls bred in the moist English atmosphere are blooming at their best.

But there is more sadness behind the mirthless, dull faces that all the aids of art cannot make gay and cheerful and youthful any more. There is care all the time; for the prosperity of Sunshine lies largely in the mouths of her boosters. He who can pay his way is accounted rich in Sunshine, and he who cannot must not let it be seen.

A very low moral standard prevails, and excessive drinking is the rule. Alberta attended an At Home given by a wretched little woman whose husband

was known to be drinking himself to death ; and another lady who visited at all the gayest houses had a brother and father undergoing sentences for forgery in the provincial jail.

Many of the smart people were Mormons ; the country north of the line had been settled largely by families imported from Utah, and there was a flourishing Mormon town where a grand new Temple was being built. There were several cases of men having a wife and family in Sunshine, another establishment in the country, and an unlimited supply in Salt Lake City. At least Mr. Fayce said so, and several others said so in confidence, though they dared not say so openly.

No secret was made of Mormonism, nobody seemed to think it at all odd ; and the Mormon ladies were smartly attired, and practically led Sunshine society.

It soon became very wearisome to Alberta, and it was also apparent that it would lead to nothing very soul-satisfying in the way of those Canadian friendships that the young Wests had looked forward to. Alberta looked on, and found that as far as young Canada and social Canada were concerned, she might continue to look on. It was not a rôle she was accustomed to.

She was looking forward with some curiosity to the first dance of the season ; at the afternoon entertainments one rarely saw a man.

Robin had promised to go with her to this dance, Gerald having put himself out of the reach of such frivolities by giving his dress-suits away. Robin's was almost new, and he had cherished it accordingly,

bringing it secreted in the bottom of his trunk, "just in case."

"There's only an invitation for me," said Alberta, "but I'll ring Mrs. Royal up in the morning, and explain that I can't go without you. She's sure to understand. They're really good sort of people, they say, and they live in the finest house in the town. But the dance is at the Masonic Hall."

"Fayce says Royal is an awful bounder," said Robin. "But there, who isn't? He's made money very quickly. I believe he had nothing when he came here five years ago, and now he's just sold his hotel business for twenty thousand dollars and set up in real estate. Mrs. Royal's supposed to be pretty well connected. He's Old Country. She's a Canadian."

"Is Mr. Fayce going to the dance?" asked Alberta.

"He's asked, but I don't think he's going. He seems low-spirited. I think things are pretty bad with him. Money's awfully tight this year. He's a decent sort, is old Fayce. He's promised me a rise as soon as things open up a bit."

Robin did not mention, what was weighing a good deal on his mind, that his wages had not been forthcoming for the last three weeks. However, it was nice to look forward to having a lump sum when "things opened up," and it was worth while to oblige a decent chap like Fayce.

Alberta returned from the office disappointed, having asked the great Mrs. Royal over the 'phone to extend an invitation to Robin. "Oh, you'll have a beau all right. I've asked the reporter chappie. I guess your paper's done fine getting two invites.

Can't come without your brother? Oh, you kid! What's the matter with the Cupid laddie?"

The "Cupid laddie" was Alberta's much detested colleague.

"I asked Mrs. Royal about you going to the dance," said the crestfallen Alberta. "But she refused point-blank. She's sent two invitations to the office, and that odious Mr. Goetz says he's going."

"Who's Mr. Goetz?" asked Gerald.

"He's the Chief Reporter," explained Alberta. "At least, they call him the Chief, although he's all the reporter there is. They sometimes call him Cupid. He's that very, very fat man with a pear-shaped face and a little hat. You must have seen him hanging about the Balmoral Hotel. He seems to think he's going with me. It's rather awkward, isn't it?"

"Not at all," ordained Gerald. "You mustn't go at all."

"But I shall have to," said Alberta unhappily. "It's awkward, I mean, to have to tell that horrid Mr. Goetz that I won't be found with him for a beau."

"You make me wish we had never come to this dreadful place!" cried Aunt Mary in distress. "What are we coming to, when I hear you positively proposing to go to a dance alone, a total stranger!"

"But we're in Canada," said Robin. "It's much more free, you know, and unconventional than England. I know!" he exclaimed. "Why can't Fayce escort you? That will be quite all right, and as proper as anything, for he's engaged to be married."

Aunt Mary objected that that did not make the arrangement any more desirable, but as Mr. Fayce had

certainly shown the manners of a gentleman, she made no further objection. Perhaps she knew that she would only be overruled. As Alberta said, one cannot let meaningless conventions stand in the way of one's bread and butter.

Betty and Sally held up two pocket-glasses at different angles so that their sister might get a view of herself before starting for what had been described in the *Clarion* as "the smartest function of the season." She wore a white frock that had done duty at ever so many little parties at home, and still looked as nice as ever.

Aunt Mary fastened her pearls round her fair young neck.

"Will I do?" she asked anxiously. "What do I look like?"

"You look just like yourself, my dear. Do you remember the Hunt Ball, when you had that frock new? I wish I felt sure that the Captain would approve of you going to this dance."

"The Captain!" snapped Alberta. "What has it to do with him?"

But the suggestion was a vexing one, and her cheeks were still flushed with the thought when Mr. Fayce came to take her to the dance. A glance reassured her on one point. He was, at least, correctly attired, and looked very nice.

The Masonic Hall had been decorated sumptuously with a few yards of butter-muslin and crinkled-paper wrappings on the electric light pendants. When it is known that the affair, including the supper, had cost Mr. Royal close on fifty dollars, it will be seen that it was no ordinary scene of revelry that greeted the



arriving guests. A spasmodic string band was working hard at a popular two-step, and up the three baize-covered stairs there was a lively scene of couples swaying and swinging to the catchy time.

Music, even bad music, invariably sets young feet a-tapping, and as she entered the charmed portal Alberta felt her spirits rise pleasurably. There were plenty of nice gowns and neat-looking men, and the floor looked invitingly good. Evening dress was by no means general among the sterner sex, but the ladies averaged things up by wearing very low gowns. The girls took off their gloves to dance.

A florid, under-clothed, stout woman cannoned violently into an equally under-clothed, gaunt woman, and badinage followed.

"Your gown's disgusting low to-night," exclaimed the gaunt lady, with a loud peal of laughter.

"No lower than my usual, is it, boys?" appealed the lady whose modesty was thus impugned.

Three callow bank-clerks who were hanging round her said at once, "The lower the better!"

"My, but there's a limit!" declared the first speaker, who was herself in the position of the cooking-vessel in the fable.

"It's no lower than ever. I can prove it by a scar I have," retorted the other. "I'll show you when you come to our house to-night, boys," she added, turning to the lads.

She was a woman well over forty-five, judging by her looks, but she seemed to have no lack of beardless beaux, recruited from the local banks, where they had probably been sent by anxious parents to be kept out of mischief. She reminded Alberta of Duessa. She

wondered if this could be her hostess. Mr. Fayce had taken the light wrap Alberta wore ; it was a warm evening in early fall, and the weather was amazingly mild again, after the first snap of frost. She was waiting for him to join her, and amusing herself in trying to pick out the host and hostess, when her eye lighted on a familiar face, smiling genially over a snowy breast-plate.

Alberta stared ; started ; stared again. It *was*—there was not a doubt of it. There was no mistaking that genial smile, that row of white teeth with the conspicuous gap, that clean-shaved chin with its black stubble, and the wide nose that had been broken and set crooked.

It was Hobson ! Now, Hobson had been the butler at home when Alberta was a little schoolgirl, and every young West, and Alberta above all the rest, had grieved exceedingly when the genial Hobson was found out in his evil courses. A scamp Hobson undoubtedly was ; a thief, too, beyond the shadow of a doubt ; and the sentence was merciful that gave him another chance instead of prosecuting the wrong-doer. But the young people had felt poor Hobson's disgrace keenly. There is honour among thieves, and the pleasant pilferer had been generous of raisins and had helped them out of many a scrape.

Alberta acted on impulse. She was looking straight in the quasi-butler's face, and his eyes met hers in sudden recognition. The smile vanished with a snap of the big teeth, and the eyes narrowed.

Alberta held out her hand.

" Why, it's you, Hobson," she said eagerly. " It is nice to see you again ! And have you got a good

place here ? You look very well and very comfortable. I *am* glad ! You know, we were all dreadfully sorry when you had to go away. We've always felt sure you would live it all down and make good. And now I can tell them that you have done. Aunt Mary will be so pleased. I wish she could see you looking so steady and respectable ! ”

Poor Hobson had turned very white. His eyes, which were light and prominent, looked past Alberta's shoulder uneasily.

“ Have I said anything to hurt you ? ” Alberta went on, in sympathetic tones. “ Don't look like that, Hobson ! You know all that is forgotten and wiped out in this good new country. I'm sure you are leading an honest, upright life now. I'm very, very sorry if I have brought it back to your mind. Naturally you would want to forget. It was thoughtless. Forgive me, please ! But—oh, don't turn away, Hobson ! I want to say that it is the Hobson who was so nice to us when we had had measles that I want to remember——”

The big man puffed out his cheeks and glared uneasily.

“ There's nobody about,” she went on, lowering her voice. “ And you surely don't think I'd be so mean as to breathe a syllable about that—that dreadful business to anybody ! You know me better than that, surely ? ”

“ How d'ye do, Mr. Royal ? ” said Mr. Fayce genially, coming behind Alberta. Hobson was shaking like a leaf.

Alberta looked round for her host, but she only saw Mr. Fayce, with hand extended to Hobson.

“ Pleased to meet you, I'm sure,” muttered Hobson.

He looked as if he had had a shock. Alberta's head began to swim. She suffered herself to be introduced on the spot to Mr. Royal by the well-meaning Fayce, laid her trembling fingers for a moment in Hobson's white-gloved palm, turned one bewildered glance towards his pale eyes, received a malevolent squint in answer, and so passed on into the room like a girl in a nightmare.

"I believe you're nervous," Mr. Fayce rallied her gaily. "Didn't you like the looks of old Royal? He's quite a dreadful person socially, of course, though he has managed to pick up some fairly correct manners somewhere. His wife's worse, if anything. You ought to make up to Royal, by the way. He's a big shareholder in the *Booster*."

By this time Alberta was feeling so confused and uncomfortable that she hardly knew what was happening to her. She danced seven times in succession with Mr. Fayce, a thing she would never have done if she had been more self-possessed; and was much exercised to dodge the Chief Reporter, Mr. Goetz, who seemed determined to enjoy her society. He cornered her at last, sitting out a dance with Mr. Fayce behind an insufficient potted plant, and requested a dance.

Fayce said in an undertone, "Who's your fat friend?"

Alberta missed the quotation and the joke, and in some confusion introduced Mr. Goetz. She pronounced the "oe" as in "Goethe."

The stout Chief Reporter became purple, and a button or two popped visibly and rolled away among the dancers.

"Excuse me, my name's Bailey; and I don't

calc'late on young *ladies* calling me out of it! No! Not on a bet, miss!" said Mr. Goetz.

"Why, he's gone!" said Alberta. "And I've annoyed him, too. Whatever made him say that? His name *is* Goetz. That's what they all call him, the editor, and all of them, at the *Booster* office. When they don't call him Cupid. Is it a *nom-de-plume*, I wonder?"

When Mr. Fayce had sufficiently recovered his gravity, he explained to the horrified Alberta that the name she had pronounced so carefully was a nickname frankly descriptive of the affronted Mr. Bailey's figure, and at her earnest request he went to seek out the Chief Reporter and offer her apologies and explanations. But his dignity was not to be appeased, and he refused to listen.

By about twelve o'clock even the consciousness of having twice put her foot in it very badly could not keep the miserable Alberta from feeling very hungry, and her thoughts were turning towards supper when a number of small girls arrived upon the scene, with trays of infinitesimally small coffee-cups and tiny sandwiches. Each beau assisted his partner to a thimbleful of coffee, a mouthful of cake or sandwich, and the horrid truth dawned on those unused to Canadian hospitality that, like the good folk of Ballymony, "they'd had their *conversazione*."

At midnight the orchestra promptly departed, and a very thin young lady played two extras in execrable time, after which it was a blessed thing to leave the festive scene for ever.

Mrs. Royal, a long, snake-like person in black satin, with daring slits and salmon-coloured tights, a

great deal of yellow hair and goo-goo eyes, looked very disapprovingly at "Au Fait" when she took her leave, and inquired distantly whether she had "gotten all the costoomes." Mr. Royal, who was hard by, gave her one malevolent glance; he had indeed been haunting her all evening with quick, evil looks out of his prominent pale eyes. She felt that she was marked out for swift vengeance, and wondered, as she escaped, when and where the blow would fall.

Mr. Fayce saw her home. He seemed preoccupied, and would not go in, though Aunt Mary had promised to sit up for them.

"Good-night, then," said Alberta.

"Good-bye," Mr. Fayce said suddenly. "I shan't be seeing you again, very likely."

He stood very erect, staring up into the glare of the electric light with moody eyes. "I wish I could forget I ought to be a gentleman," he said stormily. "I wish I had never had a decent upbringing! It wouldn't hurt then, when I do the things I do. I've tried lately, tried to run straight,—yes, since I met you, I have,—and I've succeeded in going damned crooked. But—you won't believe I didn't want, I suppose."

"I—I'm sorry. I don't understand," stammered Alberta.

"You will later. Good-bye!"

Her "Good-bye" followed him into the darkness, and Alberta went in, sorely perplexed.

Aunt Mary and Gerald were sitting up for her, and demanded an instant account of the function. Alberta surprised them by bursting into tears, and then sur-

prised them still further by a graphic account of her adventures.

"Oh, how I wish we had never come to this dreadful place!" cried Aunt Mary. "That man will very likely murder us in our beds, or poison the milk, or——"

"It seems quite useless to caution you, Alberta," Gerald said coldly and disapprovingly. "Haven't you been warned hundreds of times that it is most unsafe in this country to inquire into people's pasts? What right have you to ask who or what a person may have been?"

"But I didn't exactly ask. I knew. I couldn't help knowing, and he knew I knew."

"You had not the slightest right to allude to the man's past," pursued her brother. "A man setting foot on Canadian soil becomes as innocent as the babe unborn. His past, if he has one, is wiped out. No man has the right to say to him, 'You were this or that,' or 'You did such and such a thing in the Old Country.' I'm jolly glad to hear that poor Hobson has made good."

"But that was what I said."

"You had no right to say so. It was perfectly inexcusable," said Gerald. "And most awfully tactless. You'll have to be much more careful what you say, you know. Why, when you come to think of it, probably nine out of ten of the people here in this Western country don't want anybody to know who they are or where they came from. Many are even living under assumed names. They are no worse for it."

Robin came in for the end of this exhortation. He said hotly that he for one hadn't got a disgraceful past, and he didn't want to know anybody that had;

and he was sure old Fayce for another had never done anything to be ashamed of.

"He's a real good sort, is old Fayce," Robin said warmly. He had been working late in the dark-room at the shop, and his eyes were red and blinked in the bright light. "He's an out and out white man. He came in and paid me up my back wages. It's a nice big lump. Sixty dollars! Sounds well, eh? And I know he's pretty hard-up himself. It's for you, Aunt Mary dear. Will you give me a kiss for it? I'd like you to get some port and that sort of thing to buck you up a bit. You're not looking so very well, I'm afraid."

"Aunt Mary stops in the house too much," said Gerald. "How can a person hope to be well when she takes no exercise?"

"There's nowhere to go," said Aunt Mary apologetically. "If I walk in the town, I have an uncomfortable feeling that all the young men that stand about are thinking I am an old gink. I know it is very weak-minded of me."

"You want to get some more up-to-date clothes, that's what is the matter," Gerald said decisively. "You feel antiquated and like a fish out of water. Western women are very smart and dress well. It costs no more in the long run."

"You will very likely change your mind on that point if it is ever your lot to marry a Canadian girl," Aunt Mary said gently.

Alberta said Aunt Mary was a darling, and would look a darling just the same if she wore a crinoline, and she wouldn't have her bullied. They parted for the night very lovingly.



Robin followed Alberta for a little chat. She was his favourite sister, and they often forgathered for mutual advice.

"Do you really think Aunt Mary not looking well?" Alberta said anxiously.

"I'm certain," said Robin. "It worries me awfully. She's pale, and looks so thin and shadowy. And I say, Alberta! There's an awful lot of typhoid about. I—it sounds silly, I know—I dreamed she died, last night—and it keeps haunting me. Fancy, you know, if—dear Aunt Mary lying there in that lonely place by the river! Oh, don't cry! I didn't want to make you cry, Alberta. It was only a dream. But I feel as if I should burst if I had to keep it all to myself."

Alberta dried her eyes and settled her thoughts along practical lines.

"The filter!" she exclaimed. "We will have it put up to-morrow. That will be one safeguard, at any rate."

"We must call in a plumber. It isn't so simple a job as I thought when I said I would do it."

"Then see about one first thing to-morrow," said Alberta promptly. "We will run no more risk by delaying. Fortunately, Aunt Mary drinks more tea than anything else."

"I wish we had never come," said Robin. There was a tired sound in his voice. "I've got a regular *hunch*. I'm sure we shall have her ill. Think what a way from everywhere it is—a decent doctor, or proper comforts—and she's getting quite an old lady. It isn't a bit fair!"

"It will be better," said Alberta, "when we get into our own house. You've heard that the building-strike

is about over. Gerald calculates on being able to start building next month."

"I don't believe Gerald can build a house fit to live in," said the persistent pessimist. "It's an awfully cold place in winter."

"Oh no! The winter's quite *mild*," said Alberta. "You can leave cattle out all winter without shelter. We shall have fresh eggs and keep a cow, and that will be both healthier and more interesting. Of course, we'll see to the outdoor part of the business; Aunt Mary will just love pottering round the dairy."

"I think it's simply *damnable*!" said Robin. He looked as if he were going to cry.

"You're fagged. Don't have the pip, old man," urged Alberta kindly. "And you were disappointed about the dance. You needn't have been. It was perfectly rotten. And the girls are beastly!"

"But Fayce went with you. He was nice to you, wasn't he?"

"Oh, very nice. I like him."

"So do I. Fayce is a gentleman. He couldn't do a mean trick by anybody. You can trust him to do the right thing by you. He *looks* straight, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does! But—well, so did Hobson, until he got found out, I suppose. Well, cheer up, old man! Don't let's have the pip. That sixty dollars will do Aunt Mary a world of good; for I'm afraid she worries over the ways and means. There isn't a bit of need, now that you and I are in regular jobs."

"Not a bit of need," said Robin more cheerfully. "We shall all be making a pot of money directly."

## CHAPTER X

### FIRED !

IT didn't need a prophet to divine, upon entering the *Booster* office on the day after the Royal dance, that trouble of some sort was brewing.

Alberta saw it in the fact that the Chief Reporter kept his back studiously turned upon her, and in the crinkles of the red neck that rippled up to his neck-shave. She heard it, too, in a dull roar that was happening over the telephone in the editor's room, a long-drawn-out roar of indignation.

"Cert'nly ! Quite right, Mr. Royal ! Oh, cert'nly !" the editor said. He hung up the receiver, blinked his pink-rimmed eyes, crossed his scissor-legs, and pushed his spectacles up over his forehead. Alberta thought he looked a trifle ashamed. He crossed the outer office and said something in a low voice to Mr. Bailey, and the quondam Goetz nodded with perception and satisfaction on his chubby features.

When the scissor-legs had departed and the door was shut on the editor, Mr. Bailey unlocked his cash drawer—he was cashier as well as Chief Reporter—and counted out a number of bills.

He came over to Alberta and handed them to her.

"To date," said Mr. Bailey. "I figure that's correct, what?"

Alberta took the bills and made a pretence of counting them. A mist swam before her eyes. A horrid word that had been haunting her in moments of depression was ringing in her ears. What she had so dreaded, so pitied when it had befallen others, had come home to herself.

"Fired!" She gasped the word out involuntarily. Mr. Bailey changed his gum to the other cheek and indulged in a lightning grin.

"Yowp," he said. "I guess that's about all there is to it!"

Alberta mastered herself. She folded the bills mechanically, said "Thank you," in as calm a voice as she could muster, and turned to her desk to get her papers and notebooks together. Her face was hot and burning, and this was odd, because in the six inches of looking-glass on the ink-stand she saw it as white as a sheet. Only a strong sense of injustice and hurt pride kept the scalding tears from overflowing. Her eyelids ached. She sat staring at the money, trying to get full control of herself before she went out into the street. A squeak told her that the fat reporter had twirled his revolving chair round and was watching her proceedings with interest, almost pleasure. After a short silence, she heard him untwist his feet from its bent iron legs, and bring them to the floor with a stamp. Then she knew he was standing behind her, but she kept rigidly still.

"Gee-whiz!" said Mr. Bailey soothingly. "Crying? Oh my! all for being fired. Why, don't you know

you'll never be a good Canadian till you've been fired a few times? Oh, you kid! Oh, you great big beautiful doll! Where's Mr. Handkerchief? I guess I kin fix those little cry-drops like a dandy!"

Alberta sprang to her feet, and faced the fat, leering countenance and the plump hand with a pink-bordered handkerchief flourished near her face. Her fist was clenched. Robin had taught her to box a little, and she struck out with a will that did not fail till her knuckles had all but buried themselves in the flabby cheek.

It was not a very scientific blow, but it sent "Mr. Goetz" reeling with his hand to his jaw, and gave Alberta time to escape from the baleful place.

She *was* crying now. The wide, green-bordered streets were deserted; the little houses seemed to have no eyes to spy upon her distress, and her eyes were red and swollen when she hurried into the sanctuary of home.

There was no one about in the Block. She paused on the threshold of the living-room to consider how she should break the news, and decided upon a somewhat dramatic entry.

She opened the door with a firm hand, and strode across the floor! There was only room for one good stride, and the Meritorious Cat got in the way of that, and made it into something like a limited hop, skip, and a jump. Recovering her balance, she stood with her back to where the fireplace would have been had there been such a thing, and said, bitterly but withal courageously, "Well! I'm fired now! That's all there is to it!"

She felt that her tearful aspect was the one weak spot in the effect, but on the whole the manner of her announcement was a successful blending of courage and despair. Then she made a rapid survey of her audience.

Betty was there, washing up at a side-table, and gazed blankly at her sister, while she went on polishing a basin.

In the one grass chair Robin sat, his head buried in his hands.

"What on earth are you doing here?" demanded Alberta, dropping heroics and becoming practical. "I thought you had gone to your work. Got toothache?"

"I call it too bad," said Betty plaintively, putting the basin down. "I can't get a word out of him. And I would like to know if you two are going to be in for dinner, for Aunt Mary has gone out to buy three chops, and there won't be enough."

"Robin, do tell us. What's wrong?"

The boy raised his head and looked at her with a white, miserable face that frightened her.

"It's nothing," he said unsteadily. "At least—he's cleared, Alberta. Old Fayce—he's done a vamoose with the cash. Frite came back to-day—and before he came, Fayce cleared with everything. He was his partner—and Fayce has cheated him—and ruined him."

"But—are you sure?" protested Alberta. "It can't be true. I wouldn't believe it, if I were you."

"I liked him. He was my friend," said Robin. "And there's no doubt of it. He'd broken Frite's safe open and taken the lot. Of course, I'm out of

a job, into the bargain, but that doesn't seem the worst of it to me. Somehow, I'd have trusted Fayce with anything. I'd have said, whatever he did, he couldn't do anything crooked. I've heard he wasn't a very steady chap. I've seen him with a pretty fair jag on myself. But I couldn't have believed this of him. And he's taken my dress-suit, confound him !”

“ I think it was very honourable of him to pay your wages as he did,” said Alberta, after some reflection. “ Many a man who was taking such a dishonest step would not have hesitated to leave you in the lurch. It shows a trace of good feeling. There's hope for a man who wouldn't rob anybody poorer than himself.”

“ I do think he's a decent sort at heart,” sighed Robin. “ But he's gone through poor Frite shockingly. And Frite trusted him just as I did. There seems to be a very slack code of honour among these Canadian business-men.”

“ Never mind,” said Alberta encouragingly. “ I dare say we will both fall on our feet very soon. We have each a month's salary to the good, and Gerald will be glad to have you to help with the house-building, so perhaps it is a blessing in disguise.”

Robin said, “ I don't think !” He was not very fond of taking orders from his elder brother.

“ I don't feel as if I had any real call to journalism,” said Alberta. “ But there are hundreds of suitable openings. It isn't as if I were a girl afraid to roll up her sleeves.”

“ No. You think you've got pretty arms,” said Gerald, who had come in during the latter part of the

conversation. He had been engaging what he called a "gang" to get busy on the house at once, and was so tremendously excited that he was scarcely interested in the doleful news.

He recalled having several times warned Robin against having business dealings with a chap that was always around at the Chinook Club, and observed that he had always thought bumming around a newspaper office was a bit *infra dig.* for his sister.

"I'm not much of a fire-eater," said Gerald ruefully, "but I'm in honour bound to go round and give that Bailey man a kicking, I suppose. I must admit that you and Aunt Mary about beat the band at saying insulting things to people."

"Please, please don't!" cried Alberta. She had not chosen to relate the boxing incident. "It would only lead to trouble, and it would *kill* Aunt Mary if you had to appear in the police court. Besides, we can't afford to pay fines."

"There is something to that," Gerald said thoughtfully. "As you say, we can hardly afford the luxury of pride at present. But we can at least be dignified, and I do beg, Alberta, that you will in future consult *me* before you go and undertake duties you are not qualified for."

It must have been an unlucky day for the Wests, that day of glorious August sun and windless blue sky. Aunt Mary had yielded to entreaties to go out and get a little fresh air, and set out on a round of shopping, which included a visit to the bank, to pay in to her account Robin's cheque for sixty dollars, signed with the neat signature of Alan Fayce. So pleasant was this errand to one whose housekeeping account had become an



hourly anxiety by reason of a shortage of supplies, that she entered the bank with none of that shrinking that usually overcame her when she passed through those cast-iron portals.

The bank seemed to her to be the rendezvous of all the desperate characters in Southern Alberta, nor could she believe that legitimate, peaceful business could possibly occupy a person in sombrero and big gauntlets with fringes, and what she described as "door-mats" on his legs, these being the cow-boy's chaps of curly goatskin.

To-day, however, she ran the gauntlet of the usual knot of idlers about the doors, and approached the teller with a pleased feeling of importance.

She could not help glancing with involuntary apprehension at the loaded revolver always within reach of his hand. But he looked an ordinary, harmless, pink-faced bank-boy. Some peculiar value appeared to be attached to him, however, for in addition to the fire-arm, as if to prevent him from taking to himself wings, he was imprisoned in a steel cage which was covered in with bars over his head. Aunt Mary felt sure that if she had been in his place she would have picked off at least three of the persons then present on their looks alone, especially a repulsive-looking mulatto with a bandaged head.

The teller seemed hardened by long use to his perilous position. He even exchanged baseball talk with the most villainous-looking characters, but he broke it off to smile pleasantly at Aunt Mary.

He took the cheque, said, "Ch't ! Ch't !" and handed it back. "I'm afraid that's not much more good than waste paper," he said. "We've had to turn down

several of Mr. Fayce's cheques this week. He withdrew the whole of the firm's balance only yesterday."

Aunt Mary clung to the counter to keep her knees from giving way beneath her.

"There must be some mistake," she stammered, mustering courage. "Mr. Fayce is in a very good position."

"He's cleared," said the teller confidentially. "I may as well tell you. It's common property by now."

"Nonsense!" said Aunt Mary. This was strong language for her, but she felt strongly. "What sane man would write a cheque if he knew he had no money in the bank!"

"That's a thing that is very frequently done in this Western country," said the teller. "They do some very queer things. Of course, there's no telling. Fayce is a queer customer. He may come through with the goods a little later. You keep it by you, in case he blows into Sunshine again."

Aunt Mary went out without further parley. She forgot the chops, and the layer-cake for tea,—Mrs. Wrigley was expected,—and to order the plumber to put up the filter.

She felt little and old and alone.

She had a disagreeable feeling all the time as if she would soon be lost when she ventured forth by herself into the wide, unfrequented streets of the town. The parrot in the barber-shop window said something very rude as she passed; and two little schoolgirls, with parasols and great white bows on their bustered wigs, put each a finger in her mouth and said, "Oh, look at tha-at! Oh, you mutt!"

She was too much distressed to feel even hurt at their rudeness.

"Oh, the poor children! My poor Robin! My dear, fatherless, motherless boys and girls!" she was thinking. Poor Robin! She must go and find him. He would want comforting in his ill-luck. He would be at home, waiting to tell her the bad news that his employer had "cleared." And he was such a brave boy, and had been so proud of his first cheque.

"How glad I am that I am here to take care of them!" Aunt Mary thought. "They are all so inexperienced and so very headstrong. I shall write home for some more money at once. I wonder which of my capital I can get at?"

There was a great deal of talking going on when she entered the little home. She could not have gone into a room otherwise than quietly and unobtrusively to save her life.

Gerald was saying, "Anyone with half an eye could see that chap was a scamp."

"He's treated me square, at any rate," Robin said hotly. "I haven't anything to complain about. I got my wages, and I bet Aunt Mary was jolly glad to have sixty dollars to keep the wolf from the door. Here is Aunt Mary. I've lost my shop, Aunty. Isn't it rotten luck? Fayce has—gone away suddenly—and his partner is giving up the business. And poor Alberta is in the cart too."

Aunt Mary kissed the two unlucky breadwinners very tenderly. She said how very fortunate it was that Robin had got his money before Mr. Fayce left.

"I was just saying the same thing," declared Robin

more cheerfully. "It shows that he wasn't altogether bad."

"And oh, how stupid of me!" said Aunt Mary penitently, "I seem to have forgotten the chops. We must just have scrambled eggs again, Betty dear. We are all here, so we will scramble all the eggs there are. Really," she reflected to herself, "living in this Western country has a demoralising effect on me. I have positively told the poor children a deliberate falsehood! Never mind! Nothing shall make me tell poor Robin that his cheque was no good."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE RED-HAIRED GIRL

AN unmistakable spirit of life and activity was making its appearance in the aspect of Sunshine. It had been dormant and dull hitherto, waiting for the quickening flow of dollars that was to result when the long awaited crop came into the elevators.

It had been a long, long wait, for the last year had witnessed one of those ghastly crop-failures which from time to time blight the fair record of the youngest province of the Dominion.

Hope deferred was written on the joyless faces of the farmers who came into town behind rough teams in ramshackle buggies.

The stores, whose capital was shrunk by bad trade, were eloquent of the prevailing depression in depleted stock and a stoppage of credit that passed on the anxiety and care of the day to the town householder also. No matter what you happened to ask for in the town, from a billiard-table to a button-hook, the reply was almost invariably the same: "None in stock to-day, but we have a car-load on the track."

With the harvesting of the winter wheat there came a wonderful relaxing of the tension. There was a stir about the streets; the stores began to do busi-

ness ; the loafers vanished from the saloon doors to the harvest-fields where they were badly needed ; empty houses became tenanted with surprising suddenness, and the skeletons of new frame-houses were springing up on vacant lots, altering the appearance in a single week of a view that had become tiresomely familiar even in so short a residence as theirs. You might one day notice that the pale timber ribs of a two-storey frame-house had all but shut off your view of the International Harvester Company across lots from you ; or a sensation and a sound that reminded you forcibly of the dentist's chair called you to watch a great machine eating up a furrow for the nine-foot sewer for new streets.

This great labour-saving monster was working now for dear life, drilling its deep groove in the virgin prairie, cutting, straight as an arrow, the line of the unborn road where no houses had as yet sprung into being.

Alberta, being "out of collar," as she expressed it, persuaded Aunt Mary to accompany her and Gerald on a visit of inspection to their future home ; for the work of digging the cellar was to begin at once.

They had last approached their three lots over the bald-headed prairie, picking roses as they went, there being no road or clearly defined trail. To-day the digger was ploughing its lone furrow in a bee-line towards their destination, and two shacks and a bright yellow bungalow had made their appearance at intervals along the way.

Lots had been staked out freshly, and labelled on painted signs with the names of the land companies that wanted to sell them, and the three were able to

walk for about a quarter of a mile of the way in single file on new wood side-walk planking instead of on the short scrub of the prairie.

The prairie was really more comfortable as well as more sociable, but there was elation in treading what felt like the deck of their own yacht.

"Sunshine is booming," said Gerald. "And we own the best bit of real estate in the city."

"Really!" said Aunt Mary, much pleased. "And what is the reason why our lots are so much more valuable than all these others? They all look very much the same to me."

"A fellow doesn't expect everything he says to be taken literally. Mind the drop, Aunt. The side-walk ends here. No doubt it will be carried farther in a week or two. They do things in record quick time out here, don't they? We shall have the sewer in no time, and the electric cars as well. Good old Uncle Richard! He had his head screwed on all right when he spotted these town-lots as an investment for Alberta."

"But you forget," reminded Alberta regretfully, "he didn't exactly choose them. He won them from Mr. Fayce at poker."

"It would be more respectful to Uncle Richard's memory to forget that sordid tale," said Gerald. "It is probably untrue. I, at least, prefer to think so."

"But I feel sure," Aunt Mary ventured, "that your poor uncle would never have made such a wise selection. He was so very unfortunate in his choices. I have heard how, as quite a boy, he went to choose some pullets, and they turned out every one cockerels. He used to say in a matter of selection it was safer

to toss up for it. He was much more likely to be fortunate in a game of poker."

"We have no reason to assume it on Fayce's evidence," maintained Gerald stoutly. "The fact remains that our land is situated in the best residential avenue in the city."

"Dear me! How very convenient!" sighed Aunt Mary, looking somewhat sceptically at the said avenue. Its prosperity, as exemplified by the two shacks, bungalows, and sewer ditch, was very much in embryo; but, as Gerald said, "growth and development were amazingly rapid in that Western country, and it was quite likely that the tram-lines would be laid by the time the house was roofed in."

It would have pleased Aunt Mary greatly to be able to step into a tram there and then and go home, for she was desperately tired; but there was nothing for it but Shanks' pony.

Gerald had built a small hut on the corner of the site, and proposed to remove himself and Robin into camp on the scene of building, so that the eye of the master might continually rest on the workers. This arrangement enabled them to give up two of the rooms in the Block, which meant a desirable saving in rent. Sally, who was bored to death in the Block, wanted to join the campers, but Gerald vetoed the suggestion as improper.

In the end he went into camp alone, as Robin had formed other plans for himself than that of acting as general handyman to the family architect. Sally was allowed, however, to carry lunch daily to the scene of construction.

"Your help just now would have been invaluable,"



Gerald said reproachfully to his brother. "It is most desirable to push on the work with all possible speed, so that we may get into the house and cut our expenses down. As you know, our funds are getting frightfully low, and until I am through with building it is out of the question for me to begin to make money."

"All serene, old fellow," said Robin. "Sorry to seem disobliging, but I've already signed on with a farmer for the harvest. I go out into the country to-morrow."

"My dearest Robin!" gasped Aunt Mary.

"Why, Aunty, it will be a regular picnic. I only wish I could arrange to take you and the girls. And I'm going to make good money, too. I'll send you some every week. I shall get my board, too, so that it will be clear profit."

Gerald looked sceptical, but at heart he was disposed to envy his enterprising young brother. He was a little sore at the succession of small mishaps that had attended his own course.

The City Architect had just been appointed, not Gerald at all, but a quite unqualified youth from the Sunshine High School, who was sent, on receiving the appointment, to M'Gill University to become an architect. Nor would the continuance of Mr. Wrigley's favour have availed Gerald at all, since that gentleman had been turned down by the electors, and was now neither Mayor nor alderman, and without voice in the matter.

A grimy person in overalls here entered the room without knocking.

"The plumber," said Robin, facing Gerald's wrath

without quailing. "I told him to get the filter fixed. I shall feel a lot easier in my mind if I know you're not drinking typhoid germs."

"You had no business to do anything of the kind," stormed Gerald. "It is quite unnecessary. Everybody says the water here is the purest in the world. And it's about time that everybody here realised that we must practise economy if we don't want to find ourselves up against it. This piece of folly is going to cost you two or three dollars. In any case, why have the tom-fool thing fixed here, when we are going to move in a few weeks?"

"Never mind," said Robin stubbornly. "I'd rather it was up. I'm paying. At least, Aunt has some money to pay—haven't you, dear?"

"Yes," replied his Aunt, without hesitation. "And it is very kind and thoughtful of you, dear Robin. I shall enjoy having some nice clean water to drink. It is more like beer than water; and I have always had a great opinion of the Captain's opinion."

"Kingsway is like a great many other Old Country people," Gerald said. "He thinks he knows better than folks who have lived in this Western country for years. It would do him good to be up against it out here."

Robin was stowing such garments as he thought suitable for agriculture into a kit-bag. He looked elated.

"If you must go, old chap," Gerald said, with compunction, "I'll give you my prospecting-boots. I shan't be wanting 'em. And you can have my gun too, if you like. You'll very likely be in the way of some sport. Take care of it, won't you?"

The family accompanied Robin to the corner of Round Street, where he deposited his belongings and waited patiently for the rig which was to take him into the country.

He felt half a pioneer, and the others envied and admired him; but he was grateful to Gerald for suggesting that Aunt Mary and the girls should get through with the kissing business and go away, as they looked such a mob.

"I do hope he will take care of himself, and rest in the heat of the day," Aunt Mary fretted. "He once had a sunstroke as a little boy. I shan't have a moment's peace till he is safe back."

Poor Aunt Mary! Anxiety on behalf of one or other of her clutch of ducklings kept her on the rack for the greater part of her waking hours. In addition to fears for the absent Robin, she now had hourly visions of Gerald falling from a ladder during the building operations. She was also tortured by a pictorial advertisement representing a man separated from his fingers and thumbs by a machine, with the jocular injunction, "Don't monkey with the buzz-saw." She felt sure in her heart of hearts that before the house was complete, Gerald, with the energy and fearlessness that characterised the family, would monkey with a buzz-saw.

There were so many new things that it was possible for a young man of spirit to do in this dreadful place. The fear of a broken neck was postponed for a time by the reflection that the house was not yet above ground-level; and Gerald promised solemnly that he would never monkey with a buzz-saw, or a jig-saw, or any other kind of saw.

There was, moreover, the constant uncertainty as to what Alberta would do next, which covered a range of possibility baffling conjecture. She was divided just now between poultry-farming and opening a tea-room in the town, both of which enterprises fortunately demanded a little outlay of capital, which Gerald, as master of the finances, sternly vetoed for the present.

"Wait till we are settled in our own house," he advised. "Then I'll set up in something that you can help me in. I've every mind to take up real estate. If a fool like Wrigley can make a success of it, I'm sure I can."

"Is it necessary to be a fool to succeed in real estate, then?" asked Aunt Mary.

"Aunt's trying to be sarcastic," Gerald said. "I mean just what I say. If a fool can succeed, I can; or, if you like it better, I can conduct a business which is not beyond the capacity of a fool."

"You're always so modest, Gerald dear," sighed Aunt Mary.

"You still don't take my meaning," continued Gerald patiently. He had come up to have his supper and report progress. "But I can't stay here talking all night. I must turn in, as we have to be at work by dawn. We can't afford to lose any daylight now."

Gerald was working hard. He appeared at all hours in blue working-overalls, with innumerable pockets, and huge leather workman's gloves, a garb which caused him much simple pleasure. The house was growing under his hands, with the assistance of several other pairs of hands, which required paying an appalling amount of wages. It was a little galling to find

that he was not the fount of advice, command, and organisation, but had slid into a subordinate position in his own gang under the direction of a canny but taciturn Scotch carpenter who had built many "hooses" in Sunshine already. It was an edifice widely differing from Gerald's plan that was growing into shape; but it was still his house, in part the work of his hands, and he was not a little proud of it.

The others took great interest in its growth, and frequently, when time hung heavy in the Block, would walk over the prairie to observe its progress. Time often did hang heavy, and the narrow compass of two rooms was a poor apology for a home. Stifling August ushered in a still more stifling September. It was flies, flies everywhere. They waited in a black, seething mob along the edge of the screen-door ready for the moment of opening. They were like the queue at a theatre. Aunt Mary said it was touching to see such intelligence in the creatures. They showed the greatest ingenuity in forcing or dodging an entrance. They came crawling through flaws in window-screens in companies and battalions, and when poison-pads were instituted for their destruction, died in thousands on the window-ledges, while more came to the funeral. Sweeping up the corpses was a daily task; and the most vigorous measures did not prevent their presence at table.

The habits of the Block dwellers did not tend to mitigate the evil. A peep through any room-door showed flies enjoying themselves on uncovered food, and the only step taken in most cases was to lay a large sticky-paper in the middle of the table in the

hope that it would entrap the majority of those that walked across it.

Much of the nuisance might have been remedied. Observation of a heap of empty meat-tins on a vacant lot hard by revealed a capital breeding-place. The sanitary arrangements of the Block were far from perfect. Careless people left stagnant water standing in their rooms, and a smell suggestive of a menagerie or a prison assaulted the nose on coming in out of the fresh air.

Yet people, obviously well-to-do, respectable people, business-men and their young wives, well-dressed mothers with young children, bore it quite cheerfully, and paid high for the privilege of such poor comfort.

"At home," said Aunt Mary, "we could rent quite a nice cottage for half what we pay here."

"But there's electric light and heating thrown in," said Alberta, "though certainly the heat costs nothing at present, and we are getting rather too much of it."

"I think," said Aunt Mary, for once letting her agitation overcome her,— "I think it is really revolting to meet a gentleman on the stairs half dressed, on his way to the bathroom. I wish—I do wish we had never come to this dreadful place. And it is so lonely."

"I can't think why we should be lonely," Alberta said. "There are lots of people. They—the ones that it would be nice to know—don't seem to know about us, do they? I think it might be a good thing if you were to 'receive,' Aunt Mary."

"But, my dear child, I'm not the Mayoress! And I have no drawing-room. How can I possibly receive? And why should I?"

"All the nobodies do it here," said Alberta. "You put it in the *Clarion* and they all come flocking. And then you would return any of their calls that seem at all decent. And just turn the others down flat."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," exclaimed Aunt Mary. "Rather than adopt such a peculiar method of seeking acquaintance, I would remain as solitary as Robinson Crusoe."

For one habitually yielding, she took a firm stand on the point, and the family realised that it was hopeless to budge her from it.

It was dull without the boys. They were dear creatures, though a little overwhelming at times, particularly when they quarrelled, as they did occasionally. Sally had begun to betake herself to the house-building plot most of the time, and Betty had discovered a talent for dressmaking which strewed the little room with relics of "rag-punching," and filled the air with the maddening strains of a sewing-machine which had suffered in transit.

"There isn't even Mr. Fayce to come and see us now," said Alberta regretfully.

"And I'm afraid Mr. Wrigley has never forgiven me for something I said," sighed Aunt Mary. "I say very unfortunate things."

"Mr. Wrigley was odious," Alberta said warmly. "I'm glad we don't see him any more. But Mr. Fayce was nice. And so was Jake Crane. And he's gone away too."

"But he's coming back," said Betty, stopping the machine for a second. "He told Sally he was coming back."

"I'm not at all sure if the Captain would approve of you associating with carters," said Aunt Mary. "But he looked a nice boy enough, and there is nobody else to associate with. It almost seems as if Canadian hospitality is a little overrated."

And then, without warning, Aunt Mary, who had borne many tribulations and unaccustomed journeyings without a tear or even a remonstrance, further than an expression of mild surprise, began to cry.

Alberta and Betty stood aghast. This was most unusual.

"I know what's the matter," said Betty, putting down the scissors. "There aren't any more old ladies for her to go out to tea with. She's likely to feel lonely. Why, she's the oldest old lady in Sunshine, I do believe. If only she had a Mothers' Class, it would be a bit of variety for her."

"Oh, it's not that," sobbed Aunt Mary. "I don't want any people. I don't know what makes me cry. Perhaps it's because the things to eat all taste alike. I should so very much like some nice bread and butter."

"When we are in our own house, we shall bake our own bread," said Betty. "Meanwhile we will have a layer-cake for tea. Here's the bread-boy coming now."

It was not the bread-boy, but a tall girl in a blue cotton gown that stood in the passage. Under the shady hat, the reddish wavy hair and Rossetti type of face seemed faintly familiar.

"Does Mr. West live here? Mr. West who was lately with Fayce & Frite, Photographers? Why,



it is you ? " she broke off. " I almost hoped it might turn out to be the same family."

" Robin doesn't know any girls here," Betty began.

" Why, we came out on the same boat, didn't we ? " exclaimed Alberta. " You were going out to be married. Of course I remember ! "

The smile faded away piteously from the girl's pleasant eyes.

She looked at Aunt Mary, and discerning a kindly interest in her face, her eyes began to cloud and well over forlornly.

" He never met me at the station," she said. Her voice was almost a wail. " He ought to have met me at Winnipeg. And there was no trace of him there. Then I heard he was here, and I came—and they told me at his office that he had ' cleared.' "

" Surely—you don't mean Mr. Fayce ? " cried Aunt Mary.

" As if there could be two people with a name like that ! " scoffed Betty. " Strikes me you're well out of it."

" Ours may be quite another Mr. Fayce," suggested Alberta gently. " He wouldn't be likely to do an awful thing like that."

" Perhaps your letters have gone wrong. The postal arrangements are shocking," said Aunt Mary.

" I can't understand it," said the girl. She held her head with just a tilt of defiance in its pose, not against them, but against a world that had no tenderness for a bruised heart. If she had had Aunt Mary to herself, it is likely that her tale would have soon been told, but it is no easy matter for a self-respecting girl to

recount in the presence of other girls the humiliating narrative of how she had come four thousand miles more or less in pursuit of a man who vanished into thin air at her approach.

"I wrote to him at Winnipeg. I have friends there. And I told him to meet me. And when he didn't write, I came——"

The story stopped. It would not let itself be told.

"Mr. Fayce did leave here rather suddenly," said Alberta. "Possibly he went to look for you? I am sure Robin knows nothing of his plans."

"I don't know what to do!" said the girl helplessly. She looked from one to the other, and then at the door, which was thrown open at the word. Here surely was succour, in the strong, stalwart person of Gerald. There was decision and resourcefulness and energy in the manner in which he slammed the door behind him, and said, before he looked who was there, "I say, I want some tea, sharp. Get the kettle boiling, somebody."

Then he said, "Hullo! You there! How jolly!"

He half shouted it—and then started forward, with hand outstretched, as if he thought it would be a good idea to catch the girl in the blue hat before she flew away.

Then he remembered his manners, when he saw a nicely gloved hand extended to him, and began a struggle with the big horse-hide working-glove that made a paw very unsuitable to offer to a lady.

And he blushed as he struggled; and Alberta and Betty both thought what a silly their brother looked.

Possibly a girl who didn't happen to be this young man's sister thought different. Gerald was a well-

made young man, with nice short fair hair, and a straight nose, and there was some excuse for the complacency with which he wore his working-overalls.

There is, I think, no get-up more becoming to a well-knit lad, broad of shoulder and lean in the loin, than this same blue linen overall of the Canadian workman; especially when the blue cotton shirt is open at the neck for coolness and shows a brown throat that an ingenuous blush is just trying to creep over. There was a two-foot rule projecting from a slot-pocket in front of him, a hammer sticking out of his hip, and a quantity of nails bulging his leg. He looked like a young man who meant business.

"How jolly!" said Gerald, having got the glove off, and grasped the hand of the visitor with unnecessary warmth. "And how awfully nice of you to look us up!"

"I didn't exactly," protested the girl. "At least, I didn't know it was you. But it's awfully nice to stumble across somebody one knows, ever so slightly, when—when everything and everybody is strange—and everything has gone wrong."

"But surely—you're not alone here? You have friends? I thought you were coming out to be married."

"That's the trouble," put in Betty, who liked to cut a long story short. "He's vanished. And isn't it a curious coincidence? It's Mr. Fayce!"

"There must be some mistake," said Gerald, ignoring the tactless one. "If I can be of the slightest assistance, Miss Grayson, I need scarcely say that I shall be only too happy to do all in my power to assist you."

Alberta thought it might be a good idea to try the Post Office, with a view to ascertaining whether her letters had been delivered ; and as Miss Grayson did not even know where the Post Office was to be found, Gerald offered to take her there at once.

Alberta looked at Aunt Mary with interested eyes when they had gone.

"She's the red-haired one all right. She looks nicer now than she did on the boat, I think. At least, I never got a very good view of her face before. Gerald wears such ridiculously big caps."

"If she was engaged to Mr. Fayce," quoth Betty the censorious, "it was rather improper to talk to Gerald all the time on the boat. *Isn't it a rummy go?*"

"But there is no occasion to be vulgar," said Aunt Mary. "The poor girl is in a very unpleasant position, and I begin to think Mr. Fayce must be rather a bad character."

"I'm glad of anything that improves Gerald's manners. And his temper," remarked Betty. "When he comes back, we shall hear all about it. She'll tell *him* fast enough."

Sixteen can sometimes see as far into a stone wall as sixty can. Gerald did return duly to eat his delayed tea, in full possession of Miss Grayson's sad little story, and quite willing to impart it to sympathetic ears.

"She's pretty well up against it, I'm afraid," he said. He said "prurry," to be exact, as he would have to the workmen at the house, adopting the speech of the country.

Miss Grayson, it appeared, had been engaged to Mr. Fayce since he paid a visit to the Old Country years ago.

The understanding had been that he was to come over again and take his bride back to Canada with him. Circumstances not being propitious with that gentleman, however, he had been compelled to postpone the happy day from time to time, and had at length written to tell her that he despaired of ever being able to afford the trip and the expense of starting house-keeping.

"And just about then, I had a little legacy. It was enough to bring me out here, and to have a little over,—and I was alone in the world. So I wrote and told him I didn't mind a few hardships at first—and it was hard to feel the years slipping past—and he wrote back and said, 'Don't come to be a poor man's wife!' And that he had no prospects, and very little hope, and cared for nothing—— I don't know why I'm telling you all this," said Miss Grayson. Gerald begged to hear more.

"And then I felt that when he was having bad luck, and was losing heart, that was just the time he needed me. So—I came. I came—and he wasn't there to meet me!"

Gerald did not say much. To denounce Fayce as a scoundrel was obviously the wrong thing under the circumstances. To say how very, very glad he was that Fayce had left the field clear would have been to precipitate matters clumsily, and probably to infuriate her.

But he looked all the pity and sympathy a very pleasant, expressive face was capable of, and left Miss Grayson at her lodgings with a fervent promise that he would find the missing one by hook or crook.

"But he'll need no finding," he said dismally. "As

soon as he finds out you're here, he'll turn up all too quickly."

Miss Grayson looked dubious, but she was much cheered.

It was with no idea of giving away confidences that Gerald retailed the story to the four attentive ladies in the Block; he was in an extra good humour, that alternated, by cups of tea, of which he drank about seven, with fits of profound melancholy.

"I shall raise heaven and earth to find that black-guard," he exclaimed. "I'm bound in honour to do my best, even though I know in my heart that no woman's happiness is safe in his keeping."

"In that case," observed Aunt Mary, "it would perhaps be better not to interfere. The young person would probably be happier to remain single."

Gerald opened his mouth and shut it again without speaking.

"I quite understand Gerald's viewpoint," said Alberta warmly. "But I can't quite agree that Fayce is all bad. He certainly paid Robin up to the last cent, and he will very likely return his dress-suit in time."

"I was just coming to that," said Gerald. "The question is, are we justified in taking advantage of that sixty dollars, practically at the expense of a poor defenceless girl, who finds herself a stranger in a strange land?"

"But I don't see the connection," Aunt Mary said, looking startled, and wondering how many more times she was to be expected to spend that fictitious sum of money.

"It's a nice point, I admit," Gerald mused. "Nine people out of ten would say, no doubt, that we are not

directly responsible for Fayce's irregular behaviour. I'm inclined, I suppose, to be over-punctilious on a point of honour."

"The question is," Alberta said concisely, "whether Miss Grayson's pride would allow her to accept the money."

"Of course it wouldn't," Gerald said crossly. "But there are a hundred ways in which we could make it straight. For instance, what's to prevent you asking that lonely girl to share your rooms? It could be managed quite easily, I imagine, and an extra mouth would make no great difference to expenses."

"That would be quite a good idea," said Alberta. "It would save her quite a lot, and she could help with the chores."

"You are such generous, disinterested children," said Aunt Mary. Her usually mild face looked positively frenzied for the moment. "I'm sure I'm much too old for this country," she said plaintively. "Things happen so very quickly there is hardly time to be surprised at them. Alberta, you had better go and tell the young person how pleased we shall be if she will make her home with us for a few days."

Gerald looked pleased.

"But you needn't say anything about a few days," he added. "She's not the girl to outstay her welcome, you bet your boots!"

## CHAPTER XII

### EXIT THE MERITORIOUS CAT

"ONE has heard so much of Canadian hospitality," said Miss Grayson, "and it is so nice to find that it is all true. I can't think why you are all so kind to me."

They were having breakfast in the little living-room in the Block, and Gerald had slipped in, as he called it, for the meal; the early mornings began to be decidedly sharp, and three hours' work before breakfast gave him an appetite which he said only Aunt Mary's porridge quite satisfied. He had developed a taste for porridge rather suddenly since Miss Grayson's advent.

"When we get our nice new house finished, I hope we shall have the pleasure of entertaining you less squalidly," said Aunt Mary.

She had taken a great fancy to Miss Grayson, and indeed nobody was disposed to regret Gerald's quixotic action. Their visitor was helpful, kind, and of a placid nature that counteracted the slightly fractious effect produced on Aunt Mary's usually gentle and yielding disposition by a climate unequalled for setting nerves on end. If she felt her position as a jilted girl, she had the good British reticence to keep her distress in the background, and only Betty, who shared her



room, knew of stifled sobs, restless nights, and a wet pillow. To the world she managed to show a cheerful countenance. The quest of missing Alan Fayce was meantime in good hands. Gerald had made several friends among the Mounted Police, and had put the matter, quite unofficially, into the charge of "the boys." As they saw everybody, and had a chain of information that reached from one end of the province to the other, it seemed a likely way of getting into touch with the wanderer without the publicity of an open hue and cry.

In his new rôle of knight-errant, Gerald devoted a good deal of time and trouble to the search, and it was odd that the work of house-building, far from suffering delay from his absence, seemed rather to proceed more rapidly.

The men were already shingling the roof, and Sally, who was eager to begin gardening, put in an hour or so daily digging the garden-plot, which she was ambitious to make into a green lawn.

Laura Grayson, who was a good needlewoman, an accomplishment that with all the West girls began and ended with the perfunctory mending of stockings, helped Aunt Mary to sew casement curtains for the little windows which were not yet glazed.

But there was, as Gerald had said, little fear of her outstaying her welcome, still less of her working off in hospitality that unlucky cheque of Robin's which had troubled his chivalrous soul.

Their guest was indeed "up against it," but she had no intention of remaining so, and was already bravely looking out for employment that would keep her when her little store was done.

"I'm not a bit clever," she said. "I shall get somebody to have me for a mother's help. Home was the only place I was ever any good in."

"That's much the best plan," agreed Alberta. "When we have got settled in the new house, I shall do something like that. It isn't so trying as being clever, like journalism, and I believe it is better paid. It certainly feels more in keeping with the spirit of the country to roll up your sleeves, doesn't it?"

"With your experience," said Laura, "you will be able to tell me who the people are that answer my advertisement, and which are likely to be the type of simple, refined, hospitable Canadians who treat the home-help as one of the family."

"I could certainly tell you some very objectionable ones," said Alberta,— "I mean objectionable from your point of view,—but, really, I don't seem to have dropped across one of the nice, desirable kind. I suppose they are really the kind of people that don't court publicity—quiet, refined people that like to keep out of Society columns. But I do think it's rather unkind of them not to have called upon Aunt Mary."

"I don't suppose they know I'm here, dear," said Aunt Mary.

She made a brave show of not being in the least hurt or annoyed at the slighting way in which the entire family had been received in the country of their adoption.

Alberta, who was optimistic to the core, had almost expected the townspeople to turn out a brass band to welcome them; but they were getting used to the idea that they didn't matter.

They went regularly to the little red-brick English church. It was Aunt Mary's greatest comfort, though the service always made her push up her spectacles and cry quietly into her handkerchief.

But they made no friends there. Nobody offered the newcomers the unconventional right hand of friendship.

Yes! One exception must be made. Aunt Mary, who was slow to admit resentment or neglect into her mind, once attended a meeting of what was known as "The Ladies' Auxiliary," and after sitting very quietly and inoffensively in a corner for an hour or so, was given a small piece of muslin and told to hem it.

This she proceeded meekly to do, but was interrupted by a short, stout dame, who, springing from her seat, exclaimed, "Well, I guess if I'm the Welcome Committee, I'd best get busy on you."

She then struck Aunt Mary sharply and violently between the shoulders.

Aunt Mary was at the moment trying to thread a fine needle with coarse cotton, and the needle ran home into her forefinger and broke off short. It was acutely painful, and the effort to appear pleasant while contemplating the possibilities of lockjaw was almost too much for her fortitude. She conversed in a desultory manner with the official Welcomer, who was warning her that if she didn't rapidly get rid of all her English ways she would be turned down.

Aunt Mary, feeling hopelessly English, thought it more dignified to turn herself down, and went home. Alberta, who extracted the needle-point with the forceps from the first-aid outfit, declared that she must have run all the way.

"I am sure," said Aunt Mary, "the woman meant to be most kind, but they have such peculiar ways. It would be very foolish to get rid of English ways till we see some better ones, and I shall certainly stay as I am for the present."

Well, Laura duly inserted her advertisement, and was shortly able to announce that she had secured a job. She was evidently trying to look very happy and very willing, and not at all afraid of turning up her sleeves. Gerald said she looked scared to death.

"I'm *not*!" denied Laura stoutly. "But—I never did anything quite like this before."

"They're sure to make much of you," said Gerald, with an eloquent look; "and you've dropped into one of the best houses in Sunshine, I believe. Spender is a rich man—an old-timer and the chief shareholder in the Shoe-shine factory; and his wife wears gorgeous frocks. You'll have a whale of a time."

"I'm sure I shall," said Laura; but a little later she asked Alberta to go shopping with her. It appeared that Mrs. Spender liked her maids to be nicely dressed, and had stipulated that her "mother's help" should provide herself with two cotton gowns for mornings, a black one for afternoons, and a variety of aprons and caps.

In consideration of her inexperience, and her total ignorance of how to cook a "Canadian breakfast," she was told that she was worth so modest a sum that she forbore to mention it to her friends, lest she should go down in their estimation by reason of her market worthlessness.

She only dropped one hint of her misgivings.

"I think I'd better have *all* my sleeves made short,"

she said. "It doesn't look as if there'd be time to roll them up."

They parted with their visitor very reluctantly. She promised to come to see them the very first time she got out; and Gerald said he would soon look her up at Spender's house.

"Oh, please don't!" Laura said in some alarm. "I'm sure it would not be allowed."

"What rot! People out here aren't like that with their ser—I mean, with their helps. Besides, I may have news of Fayce for you any day."

Even this cheering reminder failed to exhilarate Miss Grayson, and it was somewhat soberly that she departed to roll up her sleeves in the Land of Opportunity.

Opportunities were going strong just then. Gerald was all eagerness to get the building finished, as he too had found an outlet for his talents which, if not exactly high art, was at least germane to his profession. To put it crudely, he had engaged himself to the City Sign Works as a sign-painter and gilder of taste and experience. But he kept the sordid details from the others, because Aunt Mary would not have had a moment's peace for thinking of her beloved nephew plying his vocation on the top of a ladder, not to speak of those dreadful pains that painters are subject to. He put it vaguely as "an opening with an artistic firm," "designing, in a way, and kind of carrying out other people's designs."

"I hope it will lead to something," said Aunt Mary, who loved to map out careers for her boys.

"It will lead to eighty dollars a month," said Gerald, and she agreed that that was a lot of money, and was

proud to have so capable a relative. With this big salary in view it seemed false economy for the architect to spend his time any longer on the unprofitable labour of house-building, and two more men were put on to hasten the work to an end.

It was getting high time for them to leave their quarters in the Block ; for, despite every desire on their part to maintain a democratic but dignified aloofness from their neighbours in the rooms on either side, the situation was becoming strained. The new trouble was largely due to the nefarious behaviour of the Poor but Meritorious Cat.

Possibly it was the climate ; or perhaps the heady fame of having earned the distinction of being an Imported Cat, at a cost of about three pounds ten, or seventeen dollars and a half, had overbalanced the discretion of that well-fed beast. Sally blamed the butcher's delivery-boy, for no one could deny the indiscretion of leaving the meat leaned up against the doors along the corridor when there was nobody in. She staunchly defended her favourite against several charges of theft, and challenged an angry lady in curling-pins and a greasy kimono to look for herself whether that house-keeping innocent was not even then sitting quietly in his own Pull-cat.

The challenge was taken up, and proved disconcerting to the Meritorious One's champion. He was indeed sitting in his own quarters, but in a state of repletion, with the unmistakable remains of a T-bone steak before him. Sally was as unscrupulous as a mother in defence of her child. She had boldly protested his innocence the day before, with a kidney in her pocket, taken from him red-handed.

"He never did this kind of thing when we lived in a proper house," sobbed Sally. "He's getting into a dreadful cat. If only I knew how to get him out to that nice place in the country where Robin is! He'd be as good as gold in the country. It's so nice for a cat at a farm. Just think how pleased the other men would feel to have a real imported cat to nurse when their work was done!"

As if in answer to the wish, news of Robin came that very day. The bearer was as welcome as his news, being none other than Jake Crane. He presented himself when they were at supper with a very red face, and glances of apprehension towards Aunt Mary, who alarmed him.

He wore a duck-coat lined with sheepskin, for the lengthening evenings were chilly, and Alberta did not at once recognise the short view of face between the high woolly collar and the slouch-hat. Sally, who was almost in tears because Gerald had slapped the cherished cat, looked up at the first sound of his voice, and it was her hand that was slipped quickly into his big one.

The others had not recognised him for a full minute after.

"You've not got your snakeskin round your hat," said Alberta, explaining the hesitation in her greeting. "I was looking for that."

Sally's eyes met Crane's for a second, then faltered, while the colour mounted hot over her cheeks, which were paler than when first they met.

"Yes; I—lost it," Jake said. He was looking at Sally curiously. "I came to tell you that I saw your brother last week. I promised to look in if I got

into town. He asked me to tell you he's doing fine, and having a reg'lar picnic."

"Lucky young beggar!" commented Gerald. "Getting plenty of sport, I dare say."

"Oh, any amount," Crane said easily.

Having thus embarked on a course of fiction, the questions that followed were difficult to keep up with. Everybody was most anxious to know how the breadwinner fared, and nothing short of details would content them. Yes, said Crane, he was staying at an awfully nice farm. Yes, in answer to Sally, the woman at the farm was awfully nice. A regular bobby-dazzler at griddle-cakes and all that sort of thing. No, he didn't know if there was a cat.

Yes, he could go past there on the way out. Yep, to Aunt Mary, he guessed Robin looked as if he had plenty of socks and he didn't mention if his feet were wet. Robin had entrusted him with a little roll of dirty dollars, and Aunt Mary pushed up her spectacles and grew pink at sight of the boy's earnings.

The crop was a bumper and they were working against time; Robin expected to be through with his job in about two weeks, when they might expect him home.

Crane had been putting in a few days on his homestead, which was about forty miles to the north, before going on with his team to work on the dam-contract at Bassano until the freeze-up, and had made half-way house of Dave Skelton's farm. It was quite by accident Jake had recognised the boy, as he stooped and lifted, stooped and lifted, stooking the sheaves as he followed the self-binder through the hard stubble. Just a trick of a tired head tossed defiantly at wear-



ness and pain under the hot blaze of the midday sun—a trick that recalled Alberta—or no—was it not Sally?

Jake lied on valiantly, answering the fire of questions, trying not to think of poor Robin, as he had seen him, working with a pair of socks on his ungloved hands to save the harsh cut of the twine, and the blood oozing through the wool, while he begged him to be sure to tell 'em at home that he was having the time of his life.

“And I say, old chap, give this to Aunty for me,” he had said. “I’ve not got my wages yet, but I shall get paid on Saturday, and they’ll be pleased if I send them something.”

Jake reflected, as he looked first at the eager, tender faces of Robin’s sisters and then at Aunt Mary’s lined face, gentle and apprehensive, that he would sooner cut out his tongue than breathe a word of the hard grinding labour, the straw bed with a barn for shelter, the swarming mosquitoes, and the lad’s swollen, bleeding, willing hands.

“The poor dear old lady!” thought Jake. “What a beastly shame to bring her here!”

Aunt Mary liked Jake. She talked to him rather timidly, because he looked wild in his peculiar coat, with his hair sticking about, and she was a little afraid of him. She asked him about his mother in England, and as Gerald had gone out to bully the janitor because the electric light kept jumping, he talked about her as he had not talked to a living soul since he left home.

He talked till his eyes grew dim, telling how she was so great an invalid she never left her couch, and

yet her presence was in all the house. As he talked he watched Aunt Mary's white, delicate hands working away on another sock for Robin. It was a joke in the family that Aunt Mary was suffering from a delusion that she had centipedes for nephews, so limitless were the socks she provided them with. The hands seemed to move in a mist, as Jake watched the needles twinkling in and out; and when, after a short, awkward silence, he got up to go, there may have been a little confusion in his mind as to whose the frail, delicate hand was that he took quickly in his big fingers and raised to his lips.

Aunt Mary gave a little frightened cry; and the tall young man coloured up furiously, and glanced round to make sure the girls had not noticed it. They had not, being occupied with a length of cord, a saucer of milk, and the Meritorious Cat, which was being secured firmly in the Pull-cat.

"You've set me thinking about—my mother," said Jake in a low voice. "She used to knit like you. I haven't written for years. I have to buy 'em in shops now."

"Will you please do something for us?" Sally interrupted. "Can you find a place on your waggon for the Poor Cat? His life is in danger. If you would be so kind as to take him to that nice place where Robin is—that kind woman would take care of him, no doubt. And by the time Robin comes back we shall be in our own house."

For one moment Jake flinched. He saw himself in fancy staggering across Dave Skelton's ring-fence with the appalling travelling menagerie in his arms.

"They—they've got children there," he stammered. "Little kids. They'd very likely pull him about some."

"Oh no!" said Sally. "He's awfully fond of children. Here's the key. Don't lose it, will you? And mind he doesn't slip out when you feed him."

All the girls saw the Meritorious One settled safely on the waggon, Jake sitting on the Pull-cat, with a pair of reproachful and surprised eyes staring between his boots. Mr. Cat made no protest, being evidently prepared for anything in the way of land or ocean-travel at the hands of his eccentric owners.

"It's really very good of you to take all this trouble about Sally's cat," said Alberta politely.

"Pray don't mention it," said Jake. "I'd do more than that for *you*."

Rip was dozing on the waggon. Jake had left him there for fear of rending his doggy heart by introducing him to the family again; but though he wagged his button of a tail, and uttered a few yelps of pleasure, he showed no wish to leave his new master.

"That's a very *nice* young man," announced Aunt Mary, when they returned after watching Jake, waggon and team, disappear in the distant glare of the big arc-light that hung so incongruously against the mysterious prairie and the far, sunset outlines of the Rockies.

"He's really *quite* a nice boy," she repeated. "It seems such a pity he should lead such a rough, wild life. I wonder what his poor mother would say if she could see him?"

"Jake's not so rough as all that," protested Sally. "Anybody would think he was a kind of wild beast."

"And if he had been put into an office," said Alberta, "there is no knowing that he might not have gone to the bad altogether."

"He *wouldn't*!" cried Sally. "He never wanted to go to the bad at all. He's making good."

"I shall knit him some socks, poor boy. I think it is a shame of the Government to insist on the boys living all alone in those nasty wood sheds. Somebody ought to complain."

"Shacks, Aunt Mary, not sheds. And they don't need to live alone if they can get anybody else to go," Alberta corrected. "A homesteader may have a wife."

"I wouldn't mind a bit," said Sally. Then she pulled herself up short, and added, "I'm glad he has dear old Rip for company."

"A capable, motherly woman should be sent out into each—section, I think it is called," pursued Aunt Mary. "She would look after their things, and I would insist on her being a trained nurse, in case any of them got ill in this dreadful place. I feel so thankful that dear Robin has got work at a farm where there is a good, motherly woman. I shall try to send Mrs. Skelton a little present, to show my gratitude."

"Poor Jake!" Alberta said, yawning, "he doesn't look nearly as interesting without the snake-skin on his hat."

Sally said nothing, but when she went to bed she took the spotted thing from its secret place and kept it under her pillow, its cold, crinkly end just touching her neck when she snuggled down against it.

“It’s mine,” she said to herself. Observe the demoralising effect of the West on Sally. “I don’t care if I did swipe it. He never meant to give it to a girl who didn’t care about it—about him. I’ll never give it up—no, not if he told me to!”

## CHAPTER XIII

### ROBIN GETS STUNG

"I'm jiggered," said Jake Crane to himself, as he left the outskirts of Sunshine behind him and let his team pick the trail for themselves in the moonlight,— "I'm jiggered if I ever thought to look such a blamed fool as I do right now, sitting here on a cat. And a Meritorious Cat, too."

Strictly speaking, he was sitting on the box, or menagerie containing the cat; and that adaptable creature was purring loudly between the wooden bars. Perhaps it imagined it was going home.

Crane did not make Dave Skelton's that night, as he had intended. He had stayed too long in the Regina Block for that, and he did not press his team, but camped out under the stars, feeding the Meritorious passenger with condensed milk through the bars. He was not particularly anxious to stay over at Dave's. Some of the boys would likely have spotted the cat on his waggon, and no man courts ridicule willingly. It was high noon when he sighted the growing straw-piles and the thin curl of smoke from the thresher that marked Skelton's, and he turned off the trail to have a word with Robin again, and to tell him that his home-people were well. He had brought something

for him from town. He had booked a corner in his own shack for the safe-keeping of the cat. A cat was a homelike, companionable thing. Every time he looked at it, it would remind him of Alberta and Sally. Especially Sally. It was her cat. With his dog and cat he would do well for company, and the menagerie, a handsome piece of mahogany, would do to sit on. And after two or three weeks had passed, the return of the Meritorious Cat would give him a complete excuse for a visit to the Wests in their new home.

He was disappointed in his hope of seeing Robin, however.

The threshing crew were gathered about the caboose, eating against time, with a married couple who were earning every cent of their big wages racing round the circle to keep their wants supplied.

Jake made for one lad of whom a fair head and blue overalls were all that was visible, the face being hidden in an uptilted mug ; but when the mug was taken away empty, the face was that of a dull-looking Swede.

"If it's West you're looking for," said one of the men, "he's gone with the water-cart to the Five-Mile Coulee. I guess he'll not be back much before sundown."

"Tuckered out?" asked Jake, drawing his conclusion from the fact that Robin had been put on to a soft job.

"Yup! Green Englishman," was the laconic rejoinder.

It was useless to wait five or six hours, and still less sensible to ramble six miles from the trail to look for him.

"Will one of you fellows give him this when he comes up?" Jake said. "And tell him all's well at home. My name's Crane."

A young man stepped out of the shadow of the tractor and took the small parcel from him.

"Sure! I know him. We came out on the same boat. I'll tell him."

Crane looked with some distaste at the pimply face and pale eyes of Willy Stringer.

"You used to drive a rig for A. Shipney, didn't you?"

"Guess I did. I gotten fired," said Mr. Stringer complacently.

Crane went back to the trail feeling disappointed. Willy Stringer looked a "stiff," and he remembered certain tales not at all to his credit; a moment's anxiety passed through his mind lest the little gift he had left would be diverted from its proper channel; but his faith in human nature was still strong in him, even after ten years of Western Canada.

It is likely that it might have been justified in this instance but for a subtle aroma that assailed Mr. Stringer's nose, as he stuffed the parcel into a convenient pocket.

"Baccy!" breathed Willy. He had had none for three days. He waited till he was round the engine, out of sight of the "boys," and slipped his jack-knife under the string.

"Gee! Gee-whiz! Here's *some* luck!" said he.

When Robin got back with the water-waggon, Willy was working with a new pair of strong horse-hide work-gloves, and the boy envied him; for the sight of them—they were of a cheerful crude yellow—



called to mind the tender state of his own hands, healed a little with the rest of a few hours out of the harvest-field. He thought he would have given nearly all he possessed for those gloves.

Willy was smoking, too, and he blew curls of fragrant smoke at him through his impudent nose as Robin joined the group at supper.

The rest were through with work for the day, but he had his team to attend to before turning in. Robin's tender heart bled for the overworked, under-fed beasts, and many an extra hour he spent, grooming the sweat-clotted coats, and sponging the mosquito-bitten throats and muzzles of his dumb, suffering charges. The boys thought Robin grooming a work-team a delicious jest.

He was fagged out to-night. To-morrow he would have to take his place with the stokers again. He had seldom known what it meant to feel really murderous; but just now he felt that he would really enjoy killing Willy Stringer, and robbing him of the bag of Pay-Roll, and the fine big gloves, that would keep the binder-twine from cutting his palms.

He was a poor stick, you see. Only a green Englishman! Only serving the purpose that his kind are meant for, as Mr. Stringer had told him.

He was a pioneer, in a poor way, this green Englishman. He was helping, in his clumsy way, to build up Canada, helping to garner the good grain and complete the harvest that puts the crown upon the farmer's year. He was working as he had never worked in his life before; every muscle, every sinew of him working; aching with the zeal of his labour. He was letting them see that he was good for plenty

of work and worth his wages, despite his fancy-dress khaki shirt, and the lanyard to his knife, and all the rest of the Old Country tailor's Colonial outfit. If the twine did cut his hands to ribbons, it didn't make any difference in the amount of work he put through; and if the confounded pain did make him grunt a bit now and then, it didn't hurt anybody but himself.

It was just a matter of sticking it out. Another week, or ten days at most, and it would be all done with; nothing left but to draw his wages—a nice roll of dollars it would be—and curl up in the barn—they would let him stop there for a day or two—and just sleep—sleep—sleep the clock round.

No, he wouldn't do that. He would go to the river and have a jolly good swim, and then he would hustle off to Sunshine to the others. It would be ever so nice to let the girls fuss over him, and bandage his hands, as girls love to do. There was nothing to be ashamed of in it. They wouldn't have been soft, like a girl's, if he had been playing cricket all summer as usual. It was dabbling in all that water at Fayce's in the dark-room that had done him in. Never mind! He would have his dollars all right. He knew now the deep joy of sleeping on hay, tired out. He knew the dumb beauty of the silent, silent dawn, that the prairie-creatures acknowledged with no acclamation of cock-crow or bird's song of gladness, and he knew the thankfulness of seeing the sunset sky crimson behind the toothed line of the Rockies, and night coming, "when no man may work."

And the fierce fight with time went on apace, and came to an end in a waste of bruised stubble, and

dust and great mounds of chaff, and deep waggons groaning along the trail to the railway behind the work-weary, harness-galled teams, now so jaded that four could scarcely crawl with a fair load for two.

It had been a record crop, as crops go in Southern Alberta, averaging a steady thirty bushels off Skelton's three hundred and twenty acres of hard red wheat.

But there was no "harvest home"; no filling of flagons and singing of old songs; no convivial passing of healths between master and men.

A frown sat on Dave Skelton's brow, and he showed no elation of spirit as the last load made its journey to the thresher. He stood with the unconcern of one not personally interested in the final consummation of hope and toil after two successive crop-failures.

Two strangers had stayed by them for the last few days, men who took no share in the labour, but who yet watched the harvest with the keenest interest. They had driven up in a big democrat with a showy team, and camped about it, making their own fire, evidently not welcomed to the rough hospitality of the homestead or the caboose.

These men stood one at each elbow of the farmer, when, the last acre cleared up, the men came together at the call of the bell that hung above the barn-door, and that had sounded the welcome summons to knock off for meals during the strenuous harvest. It rang now for the last muster, to call up the harvest-hands to receive the wages which they had earned by the sweat of their brows. That was what they took it to mean, at least. They came up with alacrity from the different parts where they were scattered, enjoying idleness after the stress of labour.

Dave Skelton stepped out of the barn-door as the men formed up in an irregular semicircle. He looked round the group uneasily, opened his mouth to speak, and then turned aside, gnawing at the ends of his ragged moustache. He was a typical Western rancher-turned-farmer—long, lean, and dried up, with a melancholy and almost churlish manner, much given to the uncalled-for use of weird expletives. But his wonted fluency had deserted him, it seemed, for he tried several times before he found speech.

"Boys," he said. Though he spoke to the men, he looked almost appealingly at the two strangers who stood by. "Boys, I'm up against it over your wages. I can't pay what I'm not able. I didn't know—I don't rightly understand it now—but—well, these chaps here have first claim on the crop—I'm durned sorry, anyway! I'm pretty well broke, I guess. They'll tell you—they've got it all in black and white, — 'em! Goldarn it, they've got my name that I wrote, as innocent as a lamb, to a bit of printed paper that they said was only a matter of form."

Dave slunk into the dark shadow of the barn, as if he could not bring his shamed eyes to meet the growing dismay on the rough-hewn faces about him. But no nervousness dismayed the bulky person who next stepped forward to explain matters. He stood out, glorying in his gross breadth, a wide man in wider clothes, and peg-top trousers, rank Western commercialism blatant in his loose, baggy mouth that reeled off its tale so glibly.

He had a scrap of paper in his hand, and read its small print with an eye-glass held at a distance from his eye.

Robin West listened from the front of the cluster of men, barely six feet away from the man who was speaking.

It sounded like a voice a hundred miles away saying this. Saying that Dave Skelton was in arrears to the machinery agent, that last year's crop-failure had left him doubly involved, and that the proceeds of this harvest no more than cleared the double liability. He read aloud the clause printed in the invoice, signed by Skelton, to the effect that the said agent had first claim on all crops for security.

"Wal, I guess that's all there is to it," said the big man. He folded the scrap of paper and looked round at the boys with a benignant smile. "Say, it's up to you to get after friend Dave the best way you know—but don't go reckoning on getting paid outter this crop. If he owns anything else, get after that. The crop's earmarked; and so Dave oughter have told you when you started in. Well, it's up to you! Any fellow that wants his pay had best get a hustle on right now. But you don't get anything outter the crop. That's mine—that's why I'm here."

For a minute, almost, nobody spoke; then it was Willy Stringer that said, "Stung!" in a tone that was meant to be flippant, and sounded ghastly bitter; and an elderly, blue-eyed Scotsman said, "M'ph'm!"

Skelton came out into the light, forcing himself to face the ring of enraged or downcast faces.

"That's right, what he says, boys! I'm durned sorry. I'll see you're paid—if I can," he said drearily. "Talking don't mend matters any."

He slouched into the house, none hindering him.

The machine agent and his companion were hitching up their team with the cheerful alacrity of men who have done the job they were paid for, and shortly after drove off, probably to find another victim whose long-hoped-for crop was garnered in.

A confused murmur began to circulate among the men. It was odd that they did not even swear. They were too much disheartened to relieve their minds in that way.

Robin heard snatches of talk dimly. The best thing, said one, was to go to the magistrate at Sunshine—the Mounted Police would see right done if anybody could. Another would have the best lawyer in town. But there were sure to be other creditors, who would get in first. Skelton was likely broke for good now. He had had hard luck—crop-failures, and fire, and horses dying—and his two sons died of typhoid in the spring. It was even betting this would break him flat.

“He’s got just what was coming to him,” said Stringer, with the first foul word that had been spoken in an atmosphere surprisingly fair-minded and tolerant. “A man that would hand a paper he didn’t read is just asking for trouble. I guess I’d like to see any person git a cinch on me that way.”

Robin wandered away from them. He felt sick and bewildered. The sun had been overpowering all day, and the evening struck chill to his heated limbs. He felt that after all it didn’t very much matter. There was no more stooking; that at least was real, though the dollars had melted into thin air. He looked with a kind of proud amazement at the young Swede who was sitting with his fair tousled head buried

in his hands, his shoulders heaving as he sobbed like a girl.

A bunch of Dakota farmers, who had come over the border to work in the harvest-fields with the intention of homesteading on the next available land, had commandeered the only vehicle on the place, a dilapidated hay-cart, and were belabouring a poor wreck of horse-flesh that had been so badly lamed as to be left out of the general impressment of everything on four legs to get the grain to the railway. It is seldom the Dakotan "gets left." He looks after his own interests with the eye of a hovering hawk.

He brings in the old, the infirm, the feeble-minded, the diseased, anything answering the statute requirements of a male over eighteen years, to hold up homesteads in British territory. Whether he makes a good settler is a moot point; he generally makes a good thing out of selling the no longer virgin soil of his quarter-section as an improved farm at a very much improved price as soon as his patent is established. These meant to be first in for what was to be got out of Skelton; Willy Stringer sat on the tail-board, having joined the party, and "rooted" at the dispirited Robin as they passed.

"I'll go and bathe," Robin said to himself. He dipped and dipped in the irrigation-ditch till the sunset turned the yellow water to crimson. His parched pores were crying for moisture, and common sense had a stern tussle with a mad desire to drink deep of the faintly alkaline water, taken from the Belly River, and tainted with the untreated sewage of the town as it was.

He did not drink; but he had been getting it in his

tea and coffee for three weeks all the same, which makes it doubtful whether another pint or so would have made much difference.

After this, feeling like a giant refreshed, he strolled back to Skelton's, seeing with new eyes the signs of distress and dilapidation about the place that told their own tale to anyone observant enough to notice. The farmhouse had been built on fairly ambitious lines, a two-storey frame-house whose paint had once been a cheerful green.

Very few windows now remained intact; last month's hailstorm had accounted for that, besides laying flat a portion of the standing crop that was more forward than the rest. The whole aspect of the place was dreary and uncared-for; but Robin had not appreciated its poverty before in the bustle of the harvest, and the up-to-date equipment of the latest Western type of machinery.

Robin pushed open the door. He was evidently the last man left; for the stove in the caboose was cold, and a heap of empty meat and milk tins hummed over with flies was the only trace of the gang.

Skelton was sitting in the desolate, untidy place, littered with the random cooking of a busy month. He and the hired man who was his one regular hand had had the house to themselves, the rest camping about the place wherever they could find a nook. The hired man, a Slav who could only speak a few words of English, was not about, and Robin guessed rightly that he had taken flight with the others to seek redress and make sure of his wages.

Skelton sat hunched up in the middle of the floor on a broken-backed chair, and Robin was struck by



the utter lack of comfort about the place. There was no homeliness about it ; all was plain, blank utility ; and it seemed a bitter place for a lonely man who had failed in a fight.

" You don't mind me stopping around for a bit ? " said Robin. " I don't quite know what to do, or where to go."

Skelton motioned him silently to another ruin of a chair, and dropped his head on his hands again. After a long silence, he looked up and met Robin's eyes watching him with interest.

" It's pretty hard lines on you, isn't it ? " Robin ventured. " I'm awfully sorry. I know how sorry you must feel about it."

The older man reached a big hand across, and grabbed Robin's with almost the clutch of a drowning man.

" Thanks, boy," he said briefly. After a pause, he began to speak brokenly of a long, bitter, uphill struggle.

" Everything's kept going against me—dead against me all along the line. Land, stock, crop mortgaged, and only me to face it. I'd two lads last year. Big chaps they were—either of 'em would have made two of you. All pulling together, we were able to keep our heads above water. Joe—he was a bit of an engineer—could do anything with a machine that lad. He was plumb crazy on getting those implements—and we figured on fair luck to clear off the instalments, and took the plunge. With nothing but horse-traction, it's mighty slow work piling up dollars at farming. They're easier lost than got, are dollars, boy. We weren't taking chances—not in the ordinary way of

luck. Joe meant to pay for them with working out on other people's land—would have done it, too, many a time over. I ask you, could any person count on losing two big strong sons inside a week—chaps that could throw steers faster than any cow-boy this side the Rockies? No, it was just rough luck—and it's broke me, I guess.

"It don't seem a fair thing," he went on, "to put a thing like that before a man that don't read print quickly. I never tried to read it. He said it was merely a formal agreement. The terms were easy enough the first year. Nothing was said about them going up with a jump the second year."

He laughed a dreary, mirthless laugh.

"Well, I was several kinds of a fool, but it's easy being wise when it's all over and done. Have all the boys gone off to town?"

"I think so," said Robin.

"You're losing time, staying around here," said Skelton. "Best go to the magistrate and see what you can get out of the wreck. I'm much afraid there'll be poor picking for all you chaps at the best."

"It can't be helped," said Robin. "I'm content to lose that bit. It's just a stroke of bad luck for all of us. And I've had the fun of the thing after all. I've enjoyed it down to the ground."

He really believed it as he said it, his mind full of the glory of triumphing over weariness and awkwardness and pain, and sticking the thing out to the bitter end.

Skelton pushed some sticks under the kettle, and Robin remembered he had eaten nothing since dinner-

time. He pushed the rubbish off the table and rinsed the dishes in a bucket. There was a tin of pork and beans, and a flat loaf from the last camp-baking. As he was making the rough supper, Skelton went out, saying he would be back in a few minutes, but it was nearly an hour before Robin, standing at the door, saw him come up from the coulee, riding a pony bareback without bridle.

"Joe's pony," he said, patting the little beast on the neck. "He's run wild since the boy died. That's why he took a bit of catching."

He slipped an old bridle on the cayuse, and let him graze with the rein trailing on the ground.

"Going to town?" asked Robin, filling a pint mug.

"Nope!" Skelton ate ravenously without further speech, and Robin began to think he was going out of his mind. His eyes strayed to the open door, and the well-trained cow-pony waiting untethered outside.

"I must try to make Crane's place to-night," said Robin. "He's about six miles to the south-east. I could stay there till morning, and then get on to Sunshine, and look out for a better—another proposition. Do you know Jake Crane?"

"Yep. I've seen him. Decent chap. Took up land in 15-18 this year. You'll do it in half an hour easy, I guess."

He looked at the pony again, and then at Robin's eager face.

"Joe set a deal of store by him. Raised him from a colt around the house. He's real gentle. Not a mean streak in him. I needn't ask you to treat him good?"

"You don't mean——" Robin began.

"Sure thing. Take him, boy. I'd hate to have him sold with the rest of the place, being Joe's. Call it a square deal."

"Oh, but—he's worth more than I've earned," objected Robin.

His heart was thumping wildly against his ribs. He rubbed the white star on the pony's forehead, and the dark intelligent eyes found the way straight to his heart. This, this living, warm, wonderful creature, instead of a roll of dirty dollars! It was too good to be true, even though one needed the dollars, and was not at all in a position to keep a pony.

He was a good-looking pony—the best stamp of cayuse improved with a dash of Eastern blood that showed in his full red nostrils and delicate, fine head.

"You can have Joe's old saddle. It's a no-count bit of junk, but I guess it'll serve you till you get a better."

He pulled a battered and cracked old saddle from under a heap of clothes and harness, and threw it on the pony.

"Good-bye, lad. Get out of my sight, do! It looks like yesterday that I saw Joe throw a leg over that cayuse. The older a man gets, seems the softer he is."

A warm hand-clasp, and Skelton turned abruptly into the house and shut the door. Robin's foot was in the stirrup before he thought of his little pack of clothes, which he had strapped up, and left inside the house. He returned for it, lifted the latch, and looked into the room. Skelton was sitting as he had been when Robin first interrupted him, shoulders hunched,

head on hands, staring moodily, fixedly, at the trampled boards between his dusty boots.

He had not heard Robin come in, and he picked up his bundle and went out again without speaking. As he rode away, the man's look of utter despair haunted him, even above the joy of his new possession.

Nevertheless, it was more with the elation of the prince in a fairy story, who has cracked the magic nut and released the winged steed, than with the sober satisfaction of a weary harvest-hand homeward plodding his weary way with his wages in his pocket, that our young agriculturist proceeded to look for the next adventure. He had all the world to himself, it seemed, stretching away before him, the tufty grasses that clothed the low knolls all sunset-ruddy to the gentle rise of the Milk River Ridge.

A night-hawk hung poised in the twilit sky, marking some unseen quarry in the scrub, and from under his horse's feet little grey birds fluttered up like ghosts, uttered small cries, and fluttered down again in the dust of the trail.

A bunch of range horses, grazing on the fluffy pony-grass beside the trail, lifted astonished white faces as he passed, and galloped off, tails and manes streaming in a wild stampede.

The good little beast under him forsook the cow-pony lope for a rousing gallop, and our harvest-man was a happy-hearted boy again by the time he had discovered the iron post fenced in with rails that marked the road allowance for Section 15-18, where Jake Crane's homestead was situated.

He was not long in finding what Aunt Mary would not inaptly have described as "the dreadful wooden

shed " where dwelt the man who was making good. It was of simple construction, having a door and one small pane of glass for a window, and being distinguishable from the barn by the addition of an iron stove-pipe which protruded six inches from the shingle roof. A small stump-and-wire ring fence surrounded the edifice. Rip's black nose was thrust furiously under the door, and Jake's team were tethered a little way out on the prairie. There seemed to be plenty of prairie. About two acres was broken for the first turning of the sod ; for the rest, virgin prairie stretched as far as eye could reach.

" Coming," answered a voice from within to Robin's hail. Robin did not wait, but dismounted and opened the door.

" Half a shake ! " exclaimed Crane. He was doubled up over a box in the corner, apparently stuffing something away.

As Robin entered, he swore loudly, and the something slipped between his legs and vanished through the open door with the forlorn jingle of a small silver bell.

" Now you've done it ! " said Crane savagely. " You blamed, muddling, knot-headed fool ! What the —— do you mean by walking into my shack without leave ? Oh ! It's you, is it ? Well, I'm jolly glad to see you, old fellow ! But you've done it, right enough. The beastly cat's got out ! "

" Well, it will come back, won't it ? Is it a wild cat ? "

" No ! It's *the* Cat. The Meritorious Cat. Your Cat ! " groaned Crane. " And how I'm going to catch the beggar again, the Lord alone knows.

It's scared to death already. I was getting it out to pet it up a bit. Look how it scratched me ! ”

They stood looking out over the desolate and catless prairie.

“ It's Sally's cat,” said Robin. “ There will be the very dickens of a row.”

“ We've just got to catch him,” Jake pronounced. “ There are coyotes, lots of them. They'd be sure to scoff up a nice soft cat. It's real soft. It don't know the first thing about looking after itself.”

“ What's it doing here, anyway ? ”

“ It's you that's responsible for it,” said Jake, with a new inspiration. “ I'll hand over the beastly menagerie to you, and tell her the cat was in it.”

“ I'm hanged if you put it on to me,” said Robin, alarmed. “ You don't mean to say they made you bring that awful Pull-cat ? ” Jake nodded.

“ I could understand it if you were sweet on any of our girls,” reflected Robin. “ But you've hardly had time.”

Then he looked questioningly at Jake's crimson ears, and knew he had guessed right.

“ Come and help to hunt the animal,” said Jake crossly. “ Don't stare like a stuck pig. It's your fault more than mine. It's up to you to help me out. I don't suppose Sally will ever look at me again. Or Alberta either.”

They ordered the flighty Rip to “ seek cat,” but he misinterpreted their wishes, and thrust the first three-quarters of his shaggy person impetuously into a gopher-hole, being a dog of immense zeal but dominated by the idea of the moment. They rode

the prairie foot by foot until darkness settled down, but discovered no trace of the Meritorious but Missing Cat. Jake groaned as they gave up the search, setting a light in the window to beckon the wanderer home.

"I might tell her it had got some kittens," he suggested. "No good. She'd want to come and see them."

They made the prairie echo with cries of "Puss, puss!" ranging from gentle and seductive to stern and even threatening, but no faint tinkle of the silver bell betrayed the whereabouts of the lost one. Rip declined to take any interest in his former comrade, and after setting a train of gobbets of meat and the only saucer full of condensed milk, they reluctantly gave up the search.

The poor little cat had evidently assumed huge proportions in Jake's eyes, and he talked about it even after he was asleep, rolled up in a blanket on the floor, having insisted on Robin taking his bunk.

"I wouldn't bother my head about the old cat," Robin said, as he was preparing to jog on the next morning. "Sally will have to be sensible about it. I shan't tell. You can put her off for long enough, you know. Say it's quite well, and you'll bring it another time. It may turn up."

"It looks such a beastly shame, after bringing the poor little beggar all the way from England," said Jake uneasily. "I do wish you would break it to her, if you don't mind, old fellow. Then they can be getting over it before I see them again."

But the loss and probable decease of the Poor but Meritorious Cat was not, after all these deliberations,



to be duly acclaimed and mourned by the bereaved family until a much later date.

Robin arrived in Sunshine towards evening, having delayed starting earlier on account of Jake's company being pleasant, and his own back and arms exceedingly stiff after the harvest. He arrived with two determinations—one, to look for Willy Stringer till he found him, and having found him to give him a jolly good hiding.

He had heard the story of Jake's little fairing that had gone so sadly astray.

Secondly, he meant to find another job, if possible payable in advance, before showing up at home. But intentions don't all come to deeds. Robin fully intended to post Jake's letter home, which he was entrusted with, and carried stowed away in an inside pocket. Yet there the letter remained, forgotten in its safe hiding-place, until it was taken out by another hand than his.

And Willy Stringer was not around at the livery-barn, nor likely to be, since he had been "fired" thence with some violence by the boss, so that part of the programme was postponed to a later occasion.

It was pure chance which fulfilled the last intention ; for as he left the livery-barn frustrated, but thinking pleasantly of surprising the others by his unexpected arrival, his eye fell upon a scrawled chalk-notice on a black board at a corner.

It said, "SIX HUNDRED MEN WANTED RIGHT NOW."

This reminded Robin of the job he had promised himself to find before he showed up at home. He stood before the board, meditating, just long enough for a person who had been watching the passers-by

from the doorstep to come up and lay a hand on his shoulder. Robin faced round quickly, and saw a small, pale, tired-looking man with a big mouth. A very small cracked voice came out of it. The proprietor of the voice had to be asked twice to repeat the sentence, which interpreted itself at last into the words, "Kin you holler?"

"Holler?" repeated Robin, perplexed.

"Lost my voice," said the hoarse little man. "Kin you—holler—holler?"

"Had something stolen? Want the police?" exclaimed Robin. "Hi! Hi! P'lice! P'lee-eece! How's that?"

This prompt compliance with the request caused the whisperer to throw both arms around Robin's neck, to strangle the yell in the utterance. A very young police-trooper, riding by on a big horse, looked at him sternly and told him to "quit fooling."

"Come in here," said the voiceless one. "D'you want a job? I'm after a chap that kin holler. I guess you kin holler good."

"But what the dickens for?" Robin asked.

"Bally hoe," replied the other.

"Hoe?" Robin nicely ignored the adjective. "Yes, I dare say I can hoe if I try. But what about hollering? Do you want me to scare crows while I'm doing it?"

"Spieler. Side-show. Sunshine Fair. To-night. Three dollars a day," gasped the strange little man.

"All right," agreed Robin. "I've no idea what you're driving at, but I suppose I shall find out in time. I'm on at three dollars a day."

"Then yours best come along right now and get

busy," put in a female voice almost as exhausted as that of the man. She threw her arm about the little man's neck. "Say, Bert, he'll look real dandy in a boiled shirt and white hat!"

The curious couple scrambled into an ancient buggy that stood hard by. Robin, with a fleeting regret for the lost evening at home, threw a leg over his pony and trotted off in their wake, wondering whether it was an evening-dress function at which he was appointed to wear a boiled shirt and white hat. The suggestion served to remind him that Mr. Fayce had not returned his dress-suit after the ball. And strong above all other feelings, as he trotted wearily at the buggy-wheel towards the gay lights of the Fair ground, was an overpowering longing for sleep, and a desire to undress and go to sleep in a bed.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE STRANGEST GIRL IN THE WORLD

THE house was finished. From the topmost timber the Union Jack was floating as bravely as twelve inches by ten could float.

It was painted without in a pleasing contrast of chocolate and pink, and when Aunt Mary, arriving in state on top of the transfer waggon which had removed their small belongings from the Regina Block, exclaimed upon seeing it, "What a pretty little house!" it was with a genuine pleasure that filled the soul of the architect with satisfaction.

It was a very pretty house. Its small white-railed verandah offered a pleasant resting-place out of the sun.

Its low-pitched, brown-shingled roof shaded the little square windows of the upper storey which peeped out of its wide gable.

Everything was new, neat, and compact. You went straight through a tiny porch into the sitting-room, nine foot by ten, which was divided by sliding doors from the dining-room, eight by ten, all nicely calsomined in buff and cream, with chair and picture rails to each room. A door from the dining-room opened into the kitchen, whose stove, to Aunt

Mary's alarm, stood on four legs on the bare board floor.

There was a little sink in the corner of the kitchen, with silvery taps, and a cylinder for hot water beside the stove. Electric-light fittings were in every room, and there were cunning cupboards in the parti-walls. A perfectly appointed bathroom completed the first floor.

"Upstairs you may find the ceilings a bit low," said Gerald. "You see, it was a bit awkward to fit in the three rooms in a semi-bungalow house. But anyway they're only bedrooms, and you'll be lying down most of the time."

"Robin can do his dumb-bell exercises in the bathroom," said Alberta. "There is no need to run your head into the ceiling just because it is there. Aunt Mary, you should have taken your bonnet off before you came upstairs. The calsomining is not quite dry, and your ostrich-tips have made a little pattern on it."

Aunt Mary obediently removed the offending bonnet, and thought it tactful to say nothing, sympathetic or otherwise, when Alberta's forehead fetched off three inches of plaster from the staircase ceiling. Gerald followed them into all the rooms, showing them the cupboards and the hooks for their clothes, and the patent window-fastenings and the fly-screens, and the beautifully fitted diagonal flooring-boards, the burlap dado round the sitting-room, and the big furnace in the basement, that was to breathe in some mysterious manner into all the rooms when the weather was cold.

"It's rather a cat-ladder," said Gerald, taking Aunt Mary round the waist and swinging her safely

to the bottom of the primitive staircase. "I made it myself, and I was rather short of wood. But you won't ever have to come down here, of course. I'll look after that."

He explained the workings of the furnace in detail, after which Aunt Mary was thankful to be lifted up out of the clay cellar which she had been told to call the basement.

"It looks a dreadful thing," she confided to Alberta. "I do hope it won't blow up, or burn the house down. But as there are no fireplaces, I suppose something of the kind is necessary, even in this warm country."

"This little cubby-hole is for the Meritorious One," said Sally, showing a nook in the kitchen. "Gerald made it on purpose to shut him in until he got settled down. Oh, how I wish Robin would come back! The dear old thing will be so glad to have a proper house to live in again."

She meant not her brother, but the cat.

"And what splendid views!" Aunt Mary cried, running from one to another of the little windows to gaze upon an unbroken stretch of dun prairie and blue sky. "We can see positively everything between here and the Rocky Mountains. And the comfort—the luxury—why, children, I never dreamed of such luxury in this dreadful place! Hot and cold water in the bathroom, electric light in all the rooms! Everything is beautiful! If this house were in a good neighbourhood in England it would be worthy fifty pounds a year."

"I'm glad you like it," said Gerald a little awkwardly; "but, you know—the—the development is bound to be a little in advance of the—the municipal

enterprise, you know. We haven't exactly got the electric light yet. In fact, they've only laid it as far as Thirteenth Street, as you'd have noticed as you came along if you had any idea of using your eyes, Alberta. It's really rather absurd of you to allow Aunt Mary to look at it in that light—to dream of having electricity laid on a full half-mile for our especial benefit."

"It certainly is," agreed Aunt Mary, lapsing into an often-heard Canadianism in her zeal not to appear exacting. "But I'm sure it is quite wonderful that we have inside drains in such a state of perfection. When I think of some of the cottage property in Craven Bridge——"

"Oh, er—the drains—yes, the drains will be quite up-to-date," said Gerald. "You'd see the digging-machine about half a mile out? Well, it's working on the sewer-ditch right now. But of course they can't get through this fall unless it's quite an exceptionally open winter. You can't expect it."

"No, I suppose not," acquiesced Aunt Mary meekly. "But—dear me—the washing-up water—won't it run on the floor, Gerald?"

Gerald looked annoyed.

"As the water isn't laid on yet," he said rather tartly, "there won't be such a jolly lot of washing-up water. And surely to goodness you can buzz the tea-leaves and all that—out of the back-door. There's plenty of room on the prairie."

"Now, don't go and get scared, Aunt Mary," commanded Alberta. "I'll carry the water out to the cabbage-bed. The man comes with a water-cart every day to fill up the tub, so we shall have plenty

of water until the main gets as far as this, which will be next month."

"And the taps will keep clean of themselves," Betty observed. "It's a perfectly dear little house!"

"It's very, very nice," said Aunt Mary. "I'm really not trying to find fault, dears. Of course, it would be ridiculous to expect these wonderful things all at once."

"Just you wait till you see the tram-car passing the door, and cement side-walks to town, and the telephone in the house," Gerald predicted.

"Very well," said Aunt Mary, resigned to wait patiently for the millennium so long as her dear children were happy.

"We shall be able to economise in the housekeeping now," said Alberta, examining the neat little buckstove with interest. "No more baker's bread. No more bought layer-cakes. No more canned meat--we can start in now and lead a real, free, wholesome, outdoor kind of Colonial life. And now for the very first meal in our new house! As Gerald says, you mustn't expect everything at once, so we must be content with a bought spread for the last time."

With everybody working like a black, and all in the best of good-humours, the little home soon began to look ship-shape. Gerald had himself painted and varnished the floors, and fitted linoleum in the little kitchen. The hearth-rugs from home did nicely for carpet-squares in the sitting-rooms, and the space in the bedrooms that was not covered by bed was inconsiderable. They had a small reserve fund to draw upon to supplement their rather scanty furniture that had served them in the Block.



Alberta and Betty were baking what was hopefully termed bread, by means of a hard dry cake of yeast and infinite patience; and as the resulting mixture had deviated from the programme for its behaviour laid down in the rules, and suddenly become convincingly ready and willing for the oven, the partners in the enterprise remained to see the matter out, while Gerald escorted his Aunt on a shopping-tour. Aunt Mary's memory was not of the best when she was excited, but Alberta had made out a neat list of necessities and suggestions. They included a dresser and kitchen-table, a pan-mug,—the first baking had taken place in the washing-up tin,—a grass chair, if possible wide enough for two thin persons, for they were rather short of seating accommodation—a dressing-table and looking-glass.

"We young people can manage anyhow, but Aunt Mary *never* has her skirt fastened in the middle if she can't see it," said Alberta. "We ought to have a mangle, I suppose. It's dreadfully lazy of us to put all the washing out, and I'm afraid the Chinaman won't call all this way from town. But if we can't afford a mangle, we had better have a dolly-tub and a peggy. Oh, and clothes-pegs. And please order a pail of jam, Aunt Mary, and a pail of lard—and anything else you think of. We must remember that we can't get things sent up every day."

Aunt Mary returned in some confusion. Gerald had meanly discovered an appointment, and promised to meet her when she had done the shopping. She was thus left to her own resources.

Finding herself outside a store which bore the word "Furnishings" on the plate-glass window, she

made a false start by walking in and staring absently at an array of fancy braces and purple socks.

After successfully "locating" a furniture-store, she then ascended many steps to look at dressers, and learned that what she wanted was kept ignominiously in the basement, and called a "kitchen-cabinet," a dresser being a "toilet-outfit."

Though secretly of opinion that the kitchen-cabinet was a "dreadful thing," Aunt Mary obediently expended fifteen dollars on it. There seemed to be a good deal for the money, as besides being a table, it was also a composite cupboard, flour-bin, sugar and bread bin, baking board and pot-shelf. There was a looking-glass in the cupboard, a rack for the cook-book, a clock, and divisions for knives and forks. But fifteen dollars was not a sum of money to be parted with lightly, and Aunt Mary decided after this wild expenditure that the bedroom furniture must wait.

"If I stand on a chair, I can see the back of my dress in the kitchen-cabinet," she reflected, "and Alberta is so clever, she can make dressing-tables of packing-cases. I am so glad she is taking an interest in cooking. I should be afraid to touch this dreadful thing. There are so many little doors to spring out when you approach them."

"Did you remember the rolling-pin?" demanded Alberta, when Gerald helped his weary relative into the house again, tired out.

"Yes, dear. In the kitchen-cabinet, somewhere. I got everything on the list—except the dolly-tub and peggy; there was not one in the town, though the hardware store on Dufferin Street has a car-load on the track. I placed an order with him, as there

is sure to be a big demand when they arrive. I forget what else I bought, but there are only three dollars left. The grocer is going to send a pail of jam, a pail of flour, a pail of butter, and a pail of soap, I think. And I have such a headache, children ! Please let me stop at home another time."

"It's the Chinook," said Alberta. "It won't do you any harm. Just lie down on the sofa till tea-time, Aunt dear. Oh, bother ! there isn't a sofa. But Gerald says he'll make one next week."

"I feel as if I can enjoy a bit of your nice new muffins," said Aunt Mary.

"As a matter of fact, the muffins are rather punk," confessed the cook gravely. "For some reason, all the bread went quite small when we put it in the oven, and it never expanded again. It will be much better when we have some chickens and a pig. Then food will not necessarily be wasted when it doesn't turn out quite right. Of course, we mustn't expect to get the hang of everything all at once. We must keep on trying till we get it right. Hurrah ! Here comes Betty from the baker with a loaf that will be fit to eat."

"I hope you remembered to get a shovel, Aunt Mary ?" said Betty.

Alberta frowned. "I won't have Aunt Mary bullied any more. Gerald went off and left her with all the responsibility, and he knows what she is like in a shop. I consider it is his fault and not hers, that she has spent all the money and only bought one chair."

"Never mind. I'll make some benches. That's quite easy," said Gerald. "Don't cry, Aunt Mary."

"It's the altitude," said Alberta. "And the Chinook is very trying to people with nerves, they say. This is the Chinook that keeps blowing the back-door open. Shut it, please, Betty!"

During tea, Gerald was unusually silent.

"I suppose you've heard nothing of—Miss Grayson?" he asked, with a carefully casual tone.

"Not a chirp. I think myself she might have looked us up," said Alberta. "But very likely she is going out a good bit and doesn't have time."

"I got a clue to Fayce to-day," Gerald said gloomily. "One of the boys at the barracks heard of him at the Hat. He was going to open a photography-store there."

"Which hat?"

"The Hat. Medicine Hat. You've heard of the Hat lots of times, Aunt."

"I think it is the Chinook makes me stupid," said Aunt Mary. "You must tell Laura, so that she can write to him at once."

"How jolly for her!" said Sally, with a fine blush. "Fancy being in love with a person who has vanished!"

"I shall do nothing rash or hasty," Gerald said. "And I particularly want nobody to mention what I have told you to Laura until I have—er—verified it. I may have to go to the Hat on business in a few days. Meantime, there is no hurry, and there would be nothing but harm done by putting her in suspense."

They were very happy in their new home. The only drawback was Robin's absence, and they all looked forward to having him back in a few days. His tiny bedroom was ready for the weary money-winner.

It would have surprised them greatly, as they chatted in the tiny room, and Gerald, who had forgotten Aunt Mary's headache, picked at his banjo and sang scraps of songs, had they known that Robin was riding by in the dark and dust on the way to the Fair ground, too faint and tired to realise that he was within a stone's-throw of Uncle Richard's town-lots and the house that stood thereon.

"Could anything be more delightful than this?" inquired Aunt Mary vaguely, at noon the next day. They were enjoying siesta on the verandah in the shade of the house, watching the scarlet and yellow and blue grasshoppers flitting about the prairie, already touched by the mysterious finger of what was called Fall, a palpable misnomer, as, had there been anything to fall, there was nothing for it to fall off. Scarlet hips now glowed on the dwarf rose-bushes, and the short scrub was downy with a kind of delicate fleece that the breeze never stirred from the parent twig, so lightly did it breathe and die away. A prairie-lark warbled its short, sweet hymn, and dropped out of sight again. The Chinaman's cow was tethered in the middle distance, grazing in an uninterested manner. It made no remark all day, but occasionally its tail gave an animated twitch that lent life and variety to the scene.

The Chinook had brought rain in the night, and the rain meant a return of the mosquito tribe, which had abated during the dry spell; hence this vivacity on the cow's part.

To the west, the black water-tower showed the town; but owing to the rolling nature of the prairie, you saw only a scatter of outlying houses.

Away to the south, a trail of smoke and an almost

human wail, and the clanging of the train-bell denoted the westbound train creeping like a dark snake along the track. Over across the track, far enough to borrow enchantment from distance, a tall, upright, oblong building was daily growing before their eyes, with letters in black on its white-painted wall, appearing day by day, so large as to be distinguishable even at that distance.

Great interest attached to this object, which Gerald had told them was an elevator, the largest yet erected west of Fort William.

It was not on this account, however, that it attracted the eyes of the fond family at Buffalo Den, but the engrossing fact that it was the master hand of Gerald that was tracing those mighty characters, balanced on the daring heights of a lofty scaffolding.

Aunt Mary was quite sure he would fall, and watched with fascinated eyes that could make out only a dim speck against the leg of a big letter, the object which she had been told was her nephew Gerald.

The letters made their appearance in perpendicular rows, on account of the paint being dry from top to bottom at the right-hand side of the building while the painters were still busy on the top right-hand corner, and

K I N  
E L E  
M I

was a puzzle that grew daily more interesting. Gerald was unable to enlighten them, as he was employed to spread the paint over the outlines after another fellow had drawn them, and he hadn't bothered looking what the rest of the inscription was going to be.

Leading in a south-easterly direction from town, a trail, usually deserted, was thronged to-day with a constant stream of buggies, "buzz-waggons," and other vehicles, for it led to the Fair ground, whither for the present all Sunshine was bound. And since to-day was a town's half-holiday, and Gerald was at liberty at noon for the rest of the day, a rare event in a country where Saturday afternoon is by no means a general time of leisure, they were going to celebrate the occasion by all going to the Fair.

Therefore Aunt Mary, Alberta, and Betty sat on the verandah and watched for the sky-artist to climb down from the scaffolding. This was the sign for the hasty preparation of his dinner, so that no time might be lost on his arrival.

Sally was already enjoying herself at the Fair, in her own way. She had commandeered Rosinante for the afternoon, as he was enjoying a short holiday from the grave-digging business, and had rambled off on her own account to have a look at the Fair from the outside. She was more fortunate than she anticipated, for riding disconsolately round a hopelessly high railing, she chanced on a stock-gate, wide open and for the moment untended, and rode boldly in without parting with her treasured "shin-plaster" for admission.

Having successfully achieved this much, she amused herself wandering about the grounds, and keeping an eye on the legitimate entrance wicket for the more conventional members of the family.

Not being of a critical turn of mind, Sally found the Fair very delightful. It was rather like a ha'porth of treacle in a washing-mug. There was a large enclosed area, an immense race-track, a grand stand large

enough to hold the population of Sunshine ten years hence, an ornate lath and plaster building on the lines of the Alhambra, and precious little to display in it.

Still the effect was very pleasing, and recalled the harvest thanksgiving at Craven Bridge. There were sheaves of oats and wheat grouped about pillars, with heaps of cabbages, onions, and other fruits of the earth. There was a tormented black bear in a pit, a collection of stock that would have made a very poor show at a village agricultural show, and a noisy Midway which Sally longed to explore, but was afraid either to take Rosinante for fear of alarming him, or to relinquish him for fear of having him stolen, a catastrophe too dreadful to contemplate.

It was all very exciting. There were Indians from the Reserve all in their gala attire, with sweeping head-dresses of eagle and turkey feathers, and strings of wampum, and some who showed a gleam of naked thigh, yellowed with ochre, under a swinging cloak of many colours. There was to be a parade of the tribe later in the day, and the Indians had the freedom of the Fair. They did not look at all alarming, but wandered about, gazing with dark, grave eyes full of a queer pathos, like horses' eyes, Sally thought, but not like Rosinante's, for his were china-blue. Sally felt sure that if she hitched her mount to the fence and left him one of the Indians would certainly steal him, and she was probably right, for several sly, side-long glances were cast at her from unsavoury half-breeds with romantic eyes and ancient European clothes. She found herself the target of other eyes too. Rough, bronzed men turned to look at her,



reminding her vaguely of Jake, by their dress and appearance, whose uncouth stare she returned without any embarrassment.

It was annoying to find that she had missed the others after all, for there they were strolling up the crowded Midway, Aunt Mary hanging on Gerald's arm, and looking alarmed, and Alberta as fresh as paint, and imbibing the "spirit of the country" to the top of her bent.

It was too bad, Sally thought. Now they were positively going in to do Mabel without her. Why didn't they look her way? Mabel was the strangest girl in all the world; that was what the young man at the door of the booth kept saying; and Sally had made up her mind to go and see her. It was tiresome to be moored to Rosinante all the time, and yet she could think of nothing else to do. To shout to the party was hopeless, there was such a pandemonium in the Midway. There was a nigger sticking his ugly head out of a sheet as a target for a cock-shy, while a companion poked wooden balls into people's hands, and bawled, "Hit him *hard*!" with utter disregard for his comrade's feelings.

A Creole, perspiring with eloquence, was exhorting the public to spend ten cents on the wonderful spectacle of "a gentleman by birth and eddication eating with a knife and fork, shaving of himself, writing with a pen, without a sign of an arm or a leg, and *bawn* that way!" There were the "Chinese Dragons Alive; see 'em biting and devouring one another." There was another nigger selling something out of a bucket, "fresh and juicy from the ribber," and a snapshot artist, and the smallest dwarf in the world;

and there was a raucous-voiced ballyhoe at the door of each of these attractions trying to shout down his neighbours.

Mabel came next ; and surely Mabel had the loudest and longest-winded ballyhoe of the whole Midway. He wore a white hat and a white shirt without coat, and he never seemed to get out of breath. His volubility filled the Fair.

" Mabel, Mabel, Ma-bel wants to see you ! She's the strangest girl in all the world is Mabel ! Come and see Mabel, where that *strange* girl's on exhibition. Mabel wants to see you ! You never saw such a strange girl in *all your life* ! " So on, over and over.

The Chinese Dragons were not in it with Mabel. It was Mabel all the time. Mabel butted into all the other cries, so that your confused senses yielded to a preponderance of Mabel ; and in all the intervals you found yourself wondering in what manner Mabel had established herself as the strangest girl in all the world.

Gerald and Aunt Mary and Alberta and Betty all went into the booth to see Mabel, and poor Sally was left forlornly outside. There was precious little fun in that. She went off in a pet to watch the races a bit before going home. She departed, as it happened, just in time to miss a fine bit of fun.

A tall, rather bored, very leisurely-looking man strolling into the Midway with that slightly raised eyebrow and faint air of amusement that bespeaks the Englishman, stopped at the door, into which Gerald had just ushered his flock, and stood as if transfixed.

" You, Robin ! You confounded young idiot ! What do you mean by this tomfool business ? What

the blazes are you thinking of? Answer me at once, sir! By George, it's about time I came to look after you!"

The ballyhoe wriggled his shirt-sleeve out of the stranger's grasp. He had that moment recovered from a most hair-raising situation. His brother, sisters, and maiden-aunt had filed through the turnstile under his very nose, with never a suspicion. After that, Robin had imagined himself safe from detection. And here the very last man in the world he would have liked to catch him in that guise was gripping him most painfully by the biceps.

Drops of sweat were pouring down Robin's face, which was very red and not over-clean. Only instinct or very ancient friendship could have recognised him.

"Captain! Where—where did you spring from?" gasped Robin. "Oh, for goodness' sake, keep quiet! They—Alberta's in there!"

Now, it happened that Captain Kingsway had been thinking about Alberta for a fortnight very steadily—and had been dreaming of finding her in any of a hundred strange industrial rôles, for her very rare and very short letters had dwelt more on the money-earning than the pleasurable side of life in the West.

He had certainly not included the present contingency in the list. But when Robin said, "Alberta's in there!" he pounced on him with the roar of a wounded tiger.

"Where's Alberta?" he shouted. "In here? Good God!"

Then he sent Robin sprawling all his length in the Midway, kicked the gimcrack turnstile over, and

bounded into a darkened tent full of inquisitive people, who were all waiting to have the light turned on, so that they could see for themselves why Mabel was called the strangest girl in all the world.

Captain Kingsway didn't wait for the light. He was not at all given to waiting when his blood was up. His blood was most certainly up, and he must have been seeing red at the moment, or he might have recognised the slender little lady whose bonnet he sadly disarranged as he leaped over the bench between her and the girl who was sitting next her. The jaws of the audience, which were chewing gum as they waited for the marvel to be revealed, stopped working upon the shock of his tempestuous entry.

He pushed unceremoniously to the front of the booth, tore a muslin curtain neatly across from corner to corner, and perceived in the half-light thus obtained a girl, scantily draped in pea-green butter-muslin, sitting on the edge of a tank, with her hair streaming down her back, and a good-sized snake crawling round her neck.

The Captain began on the snake, which he snatched up and threw with a slap against the canvas. It fell into the audience, and a scuffle ensued, with as much panic as a crowd of about twelve could stage-manage.

"Get dressed, and come home with me at *once*, Alberta!" he said in a stern and terrible voice. He was shocked. He meant to speak low, but he was angry and excited, and his feelings got the better of him for once. He even shook the girl a little. She had been too frightened to speak, but the shake let a squeal out of her, and another, and another, and they were squeals that were not to be taken for a

second for the squeals of Alberta. Neither was the face, which a person less carried away by excitement would at least have glanced at before committing himself.

"Oh!" said the Captain. He was considerably taken aback, but inexpressibly relieved. "Oh, my mistake. I beg your pardon! My mistake entirely."

The Strangest Girl in all the World drew herself up so as to be able to look down her nose at the blunderer, and observed: "Wa-al, I should say!" a short speech which meant volumes. There was a suggestion of possible conciliation in the tone, however, and he was trying to frame a suitable explanation for so unpardonable an onslaught when he found he had another to reckon with. A small, but very furious man hurled himself between Mabel and the intruder, and abused him roundly with plenty of chin-exercise, but very little sound, because he had lost his voice acting as his wife's ballyhoe.

Kingsway was really very sorry. He was trying to say so, and to offer compensation, but the husky-voiced husband persisted in regarding every apology as a fresh instance of "gall," and had apparently set his mind on legal proceedings.

"I guess we'll hev a lawyer to this, Jane," he whispered, and Mabel, who answered to Jane behind the scenes, agreed, albeit unwillingly, that it would be best "threshed out."

"But, my good fellow, I keep telling you it was all a ridiculous mistake," argued Kingsway. "If I've done any damage—I'm afraid I tore the curtain, and broke the snake's neck—I'm willing to make it good."

Mabel's eyes gleamed.

"I figure you've lost us our best snake," she said. "If we kin ketch him again, he'll never be the snake he was, the way you slung him round."

"We're going to hev it threshed out," repeated the little man aggressively. "There's shock to constitootion, yep, and damage to business. Look at there! See that empty house? That house hasn't been empty since opening, sir! *You* done that. No, I won't consider no offer. Don't insult me with it. I'll git the best lawyer in town and hev it threshed out."

"Well, if you like to play the fool, here's my card. I'm staying at the Pallas," said the Captain. "It would probably pay you better to be reasonable, but that's your affair."

He slipped five dollars into Mabel's hand before he made his escape, for he was truly penitent for the fright he had given her, and besides he was so profoundly thankful he *had* been mistaken. Mabel began to peep under the benches for the missing snake, and her husband went out wrathfully to look after the ballyhoe, who was neglecting his business shamefully, and had not uttered a sound for five minutes.

Kingsway cleared the tent, and made a dash to get out of the Midway. A few yards away, jostled by a crowd of gum-chewing Swedes, he had espied Gerald, mercifully blinded by his eyeglass, and the top of Alberta's head, peering excitedly among the crowd.

The dreadful truth came over him. They had been in the tent all the time; they had only been there in a proper and conventional capacity as audience; having paid ten cents to look at the show like anybody

else. He was not at all anxious to see them just then.

He wanted time to get over it. It was a horrid experience without precedent altogether. He had made an awful ass of himself publicly before them all. And it took some thinking over to arrange a nice way of explaining to Alberta that he had shaken and shouted at the Strangest Girl in the World because he thought she was Alberta.

There was more than a chance that Alberta might question his privilege to shake or shout at anybody because he mistook that person for her. Altogether, reflected the poor Captain, he had made a beastly mess of it, and he simply couldn't show up for a bit.

So he dodged Alberta's keen eyes, which were looking anxiously every way but the right one, and, securing a seat in a motor that was returning to town, made good his escape from the disastrous Fair ground.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE CAPTAIN IN A JACK-POT

"THAT was the Captain," gasped Alberta.

They had all left the booth where Mabel was on exhibition in a great hurry when the snake came whirling across the tent and all but slapped Aunt Mary in the face. There were four of them, and each of them left for a different reason.

Gerald went out because the others did, and he thought they went out because Aunt Mary was afraid of the snake. He was not sorry to get out himself, for he had his doubts that it might not be the sort of show that "a fellow cares to take his females to," though he was rather curious to see the strange girl himself. He had missed the incident because he had been counting his change, and making the pleasing discovery that the man at the door had given him a quarter too much, in a moment of agitation, of which he was far from guessing the cause. Betty followed the others because she had seen the snake slither under a nick in the canvas, and she had conceived a wild idea of catching it and taking it home.

Aunt Mary was frightened out by the snake, pure and simple. She had been too much engrossed in watching the cheeks of the audience in front of her



as they turned over the gum in their mouths to notice the interruption. Moreover, the light was dim, and she was shortsighted.

Alberta had missed nothing. She went out with better reason than any of them, though she was not a bit afraid of the snake ; and her high colour was not to be explained by the heat in the booth, which was certainly stifling.

All things considered, flight was the only course open to a person of reticence and proper pride. It was out of the question, for instance, to stand forth and say, " Captain Kingsway, you are making a slight mistake. Alberta is here, clothed and in her right mind, and the lady you are maltreating is Mabel, the Strangest Girl in all the World." It was equally impracticable to wait until the angry gentleman had discovered his mistake, and be recognised by him in the presence of the audience. Alberta had a rooted objection to being made ridiculous. For these several reasons she led the stampede out into the open, and there hurriedly collected her scattered forces and her wandering wits.

Gerald was saying to Betty, who was looking eagerly for the snake, " Take care ! It may be a rattle-snake ! " Aunt Mary was calm and resigned, but quite positive that the reptile was coiled round her ankle, and would not for worlds have allowed anybody to look under her skirt-hem and face the horrid spectacle. But she forgot even the snake when Alberta said, " That was the Captain."

" Who ? Where ? You're dreaming ! " said Gerald, leaving Betty to be stung to death as the result of her obstinate snake-hunt.

"What d'you mean? What are you looking so rummy about?"

Of course everybody knew which Captain Alberta alluded to, although there might be any number of Canadian gentlemen entitled to that rank, and this particular one had been as far as possible from all their thoughts.

Aunt Mary mistook the frenzied fixity of Alberta's gaze, and started off at right-angles in pursuit of a tall person whom she imagined she was looking at. They all went after her, because there was a crowd, and it was so easy to lose her. When they were together again after this digression, they were some distance from the booth of Mabel, and there was a crowd in between them.

"I don't know how you could say such a thing," Aunt Mary said, having caught up with the man, and discovered a goatee beard on the front view of him. "There was not the slightest resemblance."

"He was in there. In Mabel, I mean. Oh, you must have seen him! The man that came in. The one that threw the snake."

"Rot!" said Gerald. "Why, that chap was part of the outfit. He seemed to know that girl, you know."

"Young men do know queer people sometimes," Aunt Mary objected. "But I'm sure Captain Kingsway could never have met that peculiar person. And what should he be doing here?"

"He thought she was me," said Alberta. "Oh, don't bother! Gerald, go back and tell him we're here."

"Certainly not!" said Gerald hastily. "Don't you know you never ought to speak to a man when

he's with a girl you don't know. It might be beastly awkward. Besides, he's a nasty-tempered beggar when his monkey's up. I'll bet it wasn't him at all. Aunt Mary, take hold of my arm, or we shall be losing you again."

All this talking only took a very short time, for the talkers talked very quickly, and often several at a time; but it lasted long enough, just long enough for the abashed Captain to slink off in the hired motor without being seen.

Alberta rushed back to the tent herself. She was almost ready to cry.

She had seen him! The dear old Captain, whom they all thought safe at home in Craven Bridge. She *must* find him. She could not think why she had run away in that stupid way.

What could he be doing—here in Sunshine? And how did he come to call the Strange Girl by her name in that dictatorial manner?

Why, said Alberta's heart to her racing pulses, why but because it was Alberta that he had come to find.

The dear old Captain! As if she could possibly mistake him! And he was in such a wax, poor old thing!

But the little man and Mabel were mending the curtain, and the booth was empty, and the ballyhoe was gone from the door.

"He doesn't seem to be anywhere about," she said, returning disconsolately.

"He never was anywhere," Gerald replied, and after she had strained her eyes searching crowds all afternoon, and seen nothing of the show for looking for

the Captain, Alberta herself was inclined to set the impression down as a touch of the sun, or a "trick of imagination." Gerald said drily that she must have a vivid imagination.

It had spoiled everybody's zest for the Fair, and only Betty's loud protest prevented them from yielding to Aunt Mary's appeal to be taken away from that dreadful place. However, they did their duty by the Fair nobly. Gerald explained the use of all the implements at the International Harvester exhibit at length, and Aunt Mary went home, much edified with a vivid impression of the steam-thresher pursuing a self-binder and a nine-furrow plough over the harvest fields of Sunny Southern Alberta.

Sally, being mounted, was at home before any of them. She dismissed her steed at the gate—you had only to give him a spank and he would go back to the graveyard of himself, which saved her a walk home.

She almost threw a fit, as they say in the West, when she saw the Captain sitting on the verandah, swatting mosquitoes, and whistling to pass the time. Her second thought was to feel proud of the impression she must make on him. Rosinante happened to be looking his best, on account of having had a whole holiday from the graveyard, and having stood with his legs in the water to wash the mud off.

It was a distinct score to get the pull of the others in having the first sight of the Captain, though she generously forbore from the joy of showing him all over the house, and got tea ready instead.

Kingsway followed her about while she did it, and got in the way, and Sally told him all the news as it came into her head.

"It will be so jolly now you've come," she said. "You'll be odding about with nothing to do. We'll have picnics in the river-bottom. It's awfully nice when you get used to the mosquitoes. Gerald will want you to go duck-shooting with him, but please don't, because he will never let us girls go, and I think it's mean for the men to go off and leave us with nothing but the chores to do."

"But—all the nice boys you were going to play tennis with? Five boys to a girl, didn't I hear, a few months ago? Oh, Sally! You don't mean to say you can find time to play with an old buffer like me? I counted on you having a lover apiece, at the very least."

Sally pondered.

"There aren't *quite* as many really *nice* boys as you might think," she said, with a little sigh. "But I think Jake Crane is in love with Alberta."

When Sally had said this, she found that her cheeks, and even all round her neck, were so hot and felt so furiously crimson that she had to run into the kitchen to hide her confusion. But there was no need to run into the kitchen, for the Captain had turned his back on the room, and was looking away over the prairie, his neck set very stiff, and his hands twitching at the edge of his jacket. When Sally returned, under the impression that her cheeks had resumed their normal tint, he spoke in a constrained voice, without looking round.

"So Jake Crane is in love with Alberta?" he said. "I knew a boy called Crane, a lot of years ago."

"It wouldn't be our Jake," said Sally. "He's

been out here for years, ever since he was quite a youngster."

"What's he like?" asked the Captain shortly.

Sally gave a little gasp. This was a leading question. Of course, if she had opened the subject a little more candidly and said, "I think Jake is in love with Alberta, but I hope it is really me!" the Captain would have shown more tact than make such a pointed attack.

"Like? Oh, he's rather nice," said Sally, with a spurt of description. "Quite tall—taller than you, I think—and—oh, brown—sunburnt, you know, with very blue eyes. And sort of athletic-looking—and so manly and straight! You couldn't think he was anything but a gentleman for a minute, though some people would say he was nothing but a teamster. But he's gone to his homestead now, and I—we feel sure he's going to prove up. He'd have done it long ago, but he's had such awfully bad luck. It was the most romantic thing in the world, how we came to know him—— Oh, here are the others at last!"

"There, didn't I tell you?" Alberta cried. "How awfully jolly! How dear of you to come without telling us! I *knew* it was you! As if I could possibly be mistaken! And they wouldn't believe me."

Betty threw her arms about the Captain's neck. Aunt Mary began to cry.

"Don't mind me," she said incoherently. "Dear me, I can't think why I'm crying! It seems such a responsibility off my mind."

"You're awfully snug here," the Captain said. "Jolly nice little house you've got!"

Gerald was so pleased that he launched at once

into an account of the building enterprise, with figures in detail, which put off the Captain's proposed taradiddle for a few minutes.

Then Alberta said, "Did you come to the Fair to find *us*, Captain? The others wouldn't believe it was you."

"It wasn't me," said Kingsway, lying brazenly. There was nothing else for it.

"Wasn't you? But—I saw you! And you're here!" cried Alberta.

"Can't help that," Kingsway said shortly.

"Well, it's beyond me!" Alberta breathed incredulously.

There was just the dimmest suspicion of constraint as they sat down about the creaky table; and this was odd, when you reflect that here was the Captain—the guide, philosopher, and friend of them all—come all the way to Sunshine to see them, and positively sitting among them, having his supper with them, as if the Atlantic Ocean had never rolled between them. And yet there was a cloud somewhere. Alberta felt it most. She was thinking all the time about Mabel, the strangest girl in the world, and asking herself if her eyes could possibly have deceived her.

Kingsway was gay enough by fits and starts; he talked and laughed and listened to everyone's adventures, and gave no advice, and praised the house and the lots and the view, and everything he was expected to praise.

"And here's your filter, Captain, ready fixed on the pipe, only waiting for the water-supply," said Alberta. "We have water brought in a cart at present, so we can't use it yet."

The Captain hoped they boiled the water, and Alberta said that they usually boiled what they made the tea of, but the water was from the Belly River, and like Cæsar's wife.

"Well, tell me what you're all doing with yourselves."

The friend of the family looked from one face to another, and everybody was at a loss where to begin.

"I'm doing chores," said Betty at last. "And Aunt Mary, but we wish she wouldn't. And so's Alberta too, now that she hasn't got a job."

Here Alberta chipped in to explain that she was going to roll up her sleeves again as soon as they were settled in the new house, and was, in fact, looking out for a berth already, and had advertised for one.

Gerald told modestly that he had found a small opening which was certain to expand into "something worth while" in a short time.

"I'm in with a really big concern. At present I'm acting as a kind of decorative artist in a way, but that's only temporary. It's a big English milling company, you know, just started up, and there's any amount of scope in a concern like that. See, across there! the new elevator! They say it's some crack-brained English scheme for protecting the farmers against the big interests. The grain-dealers are in a ring to keep prices down, and the farmer has to take what they choose to pay, because he has no means of getting at the market without the elevator-men. This concern aims at paying the proper price, and they're running up elevators all over the province. It's bound to fail, but they seem to have plenty of money behind them, and I shall have a job with them



while it lasts. We're painting the name on the side. It's getting a bit dark, but you can just make it out."

"I see," said the Captain. A ghost of a smile flitted across his face. "What's the firm, did you say?"

"Funnily enough, I don't know. I don't come in direct contact with the firm. I'm kind of under the—the building contractor, you see. But, of course, those chaps are simply keen on nosing out talent. You're bound to come to the front, if you only stick at it and let 'em see you're not ashamed to put on overalls and work with your hands."

"I see," said the Captain again.

"Oh, you soon get wise to that when you've been in this Western country a few months," Gerald said airily.

Then the Captain made a bad "break."

"And what about Robin?" he asked sternly. "I'm bound to say I was shocked, amazed, horrified, to see him bawling there—a low-down, touting ballyhoe at a side-show. You must stop it at once. I'll find the lad a better job than that! It's disgraceful, you know. When does he come in? Does he stand bawling about Mabel till midnight? You know, there's no need for a gentleman to let himself out for a ballyhoe, even if he *is* a bit of a fool! You must put your foot down about this kind of thing, Aunt Mary. Jove!" he added, "his face was a study when he saw me."

There was a confused chorus. Surprised looks were exchanged. Aunt Mary said, "Oh, it is all so dreadful! A ballyhoe? What dreadful thing is that?"

Alberta said, "At the Fair? I thought you said you hadn't been at the Fair?"

Kingsway swore under his breath.

"Do you mean to say that you didn't know Robin was at the Fair?"

"Robin is at a farm thirty miles out in the country," said Sally. "You're dreaming."

The surprise-chorus broke out again, ringing in his ears as he hurriedly said good-night, and left Uncle Richard's town-lots on all fours, with a length of tangled wire about his shins and a terribly tangled web woven about his too-ready tongue.

"I *knew* he was at the Fair all along," said Alberta. "He must be wandering in his mind. What *did* he mean by that about Robin? And what is a ballyhoe?"

"I should think the sun has affected us all," said Aunt Mary. "I'm sure I'm not quite responsible."

"A ballyhoe," explained Gerald, "is the chap that stands at the door of a tent and does the bawling. I wonder—Robin can make a beastly row if he likes."

Then they all made Gerald feel thoroughly ashamed of the suggestion. As if Robin would disgrace the family by such a proceeding! And as if his own flesh and blood would have walked right under his nose without recognising him! "And as if," said Sally conclusively, "he would have come so near home without bringing the Poor Cat!" That settled it. He could never take that precious charge to so noisy a place. It stood to reason.

"Why," mused Alberta, reverting to another aspect of the puzzle,—“why did the Captain want to pretend that he was not at the Fair? He rushed away like that because he was mad at himself for letting it out.”

"Because of that girl Mabel," said Gerald promptly.

"You ought to have more tact than keep bothering him about it."

This explanation brought Alberta very near to tears.

"I tell you he thought she was me," she replied indignantly. "You are determined to make everybody as black as possible. Robin a ballyhoe and the Captain a friend of that low girl! It isn't a bit fair, when a person isn't there to defend himself."

"The whole thing is very simply accounted for," quoth Gerald knowingly, "by the simple fact that a glass or two of whisky goes a lot farther in this Western country on account of the altitude; and, of course, old Kingsway wouldn't be wise to that at first. I'll drop him a hint to be more careful when I see him again."

"But you don't surely think——" began Aunt Mary.

"I cert'nly do," rejoined Gerald. "He came a lovely mucker before he was out of sight."

Alberta said no more, but before breakfast the next morning she carefully gleaned up all the stray lengths of wire that were lying about the premises to entrap unwary feet.

Gerald mentioned at breakfast that he thought it was beastly inconsiderate of people to cry, instead of going to sleep at night, when there was only a lath-and-plaster partition between the rooms.

"It was your fault," pleaded Aunt Mary, whose eyes were dim behind her spectacles. "I'm perfectly miserable at the idea of Robin mixed up with those dreadful people. Mabel was really rather nice-looking in a coarse way, and Robin is such an impressionable boy."

Gerald said it was most likely all rot, and it would be better to let it pass if the Captain said no more about it. And it was Alberta who had kept him awake, by weeping at the top of her voice. Aunt Mary's little snivel wouldn't keep anybody awake.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A PAGE FROM A BACK-NUMBER

It is to be feared that Captain Kingsway fared no better in the matter of sleep than did the family at Buffalo Den, for which he most unjustly blamed the bed at the Pallas Hotel, which was really neither better nor worse than the generality of Canadian beds, and ought to have been good enough for a man who had slept sweetly and soundly under a waggon not a mile away a few years ago.

A few years ? Ten, no less.

" I'm getting an old fellow," Kingsway told himself. He looked out over the town from his high window ; the town that had been growing large enough to call itself a city while he had been getting an old fellow.

Ten years ! The streets and houses and stores and business blocks that had sprung into being ! The great bridge spanning the wide, deep river coulee, linking the town with the great stretches of prairie to the west, and the formerly unexploited pass through the Crow's Nest between the prairie and the coast.

And it was only ten years ago that five young Englishmen, hunting big game and big investments in that then little known province, had made a bid for

fortune ahead of the railway, and purchased among them the town-site of what was to-day the thriving city of Sunshine.

The youngest of the five looked out over his investment and saw that it was good. He had not plunged very heavily, it is true, but small investments gave big returns in those days, when they did not vanish altogether in the vast Inane.

But Kingsway was not thinking about dollars just now.

He was thinking about Alberta. Alberta, who had been growing too, all through those ten years, growing about his life, about his heart, growing so much a part of the quiet life at Craven Bridge that he had scarcely realised what the power was that had kept him so long moored to that quiet backwater, when the wander-drop was still lurking in his blood. He had found out lately what it was that kept him there, content with inaction, long after the wound that invalidated him from the service was but a memory or a rare twinge on a wintry evening. The wander-drop had driven forth Alberta in her turn, and Craven Bridge ceased to suffice him.

So here he was, back in Southern Alberta, that very big province which had given a name to an English baby twenty-two years ago ; that new country that had been kind to a young man who travelled and shot and speculated there ten years back. Here was that young man back again, ten years older and wiser, and feeling rather disgusted with himself for the years that the locust had eaten.

He was telling himself ruefully that Alberta had been in the right of it, flying hot-foot to do her duty

by her town-lots ; a better Empire-builder than himself, who owned a fifth of the town-site of Sunshine.

" And so—and so Crane was making up to Alberta ! What a queer little world it was, to be sure ! "

Kingsway fell into a brown study, as he looked across the waste of undeveloped prairie, and called up old faces and old scenes, and voices not heard for many years.

The boy Crane had gone along with the party of prospectors. Not because he had any money to invest, or knew how to do anything much, but simply because he was a nice boy. Kingsway had picked him up, alone and very bewildered in Winnipeg, and taken pity on his crude hopes, that were bound to have such a harsh awakening.

He stayed with them six months, making himself useful and having the time of his life, camping and driving and exploring the lone land, and sharing in any sport that turned up. He was then as green a lad of eighteen, this young James Crane, as ever left an English vicarage home to make a fortune, but before they parted he had proved himself a man, and won the respect of the whole party.

That is another story, which has its place elsewhere.

" I must see Crane," thought the Captain. " I wonder if it can be the same boy. Sure to be. And still trying to prove up ! "

He sighed a little wearily. He found himself wishing the boy had not been such a particularly nice boy, wishing there was any reason that would make it his painful duty to discourage Alberta from having anything to do with the fellow. But there wasn't.

Or rather, if anybody might consider an extra unlucky teamster by summer and homesteader by winter an ineligible suitor for the nicest girl he knew, the remedy for that drawback was surely ready to the hand of the man who owned the fifth part of Sunshine.

The Captain breakfasted, interviewed a lawyer who called on him on behalf of Mabel, that Strange Girl, and announced firmly and plainly that he was not going to be imposed upon. He then paid up a quite ridiculous sum as compensation for the unhappy occurrence, upon learning that the enterprising couple were two distressed homesteaders who had been hailed out that summer, and had gone into the side-show business as a forlorn hope of saving the land they had stuck to grimly through three bad seasons.

He was soft hearted, this Englishman, if you knew how to get at him.

There was a little paragraph in the *Sunshine Booster* to the effect that Captain Kingsway of Craven Bridge, England, was in the city for a few days, "looking after his business interests in this locality."

Having read this interesting item, the subject decided that he had better look after the said business interests, hired a team and drove out to the railroad track to inspect building operations that were in progress in connection with those interests.

He went over a big elevator that was being erected, and watched a young man, slung on a trestle in mid-air, painting his own name in big letters on its side. He didn't hail the painter, for he thought it more than likely that a small surprise would be enough to upset his balance. He went on to cogitate some workmen's



dwelling which he had in his mind to erect on some two acres of vacant land adjoining the elevator. He wondered if the young sign-painter would be sufficiently biddable to employ as architect.

Mr. Wrigley, Real Estate agent, had charge of certain transactions, and was very much hurt at the Captain's curt refusal to accept what he considered very tempting offers for the land in question.

"But those town-lots are worth five hundred dollars each," he expostulated. "Now's the time to sell, while the place is booming. Why, gol-darn it, man, it won't pay you to build on those lots, not if you rented houses at sixty dollars a month."

"That's my business," Kingsway snapped. "I don't expect it to pay me. I only know that at present a workman cannot get a shelter for himself and his family under twenty dollars a month. That property isn't on the market."

He turned south from the trail, and crossed virgin prairie to where, a buff and white pimple on a brown-green waste, rose the little house in search of which, quite apart from the business interests referred to in the *Booster*, he had come all the way from England. But he drove slowly and his spirits fell, though the morning was fresh and cool, and the dry sage-brush crackled merrily under the horses' feet.

The family, the ladies, that is, were all out on the verandah; not, as he at first flattered himself, waiting to welcome him, but gazing intently over the prairie towards the new elevator—Alberta with a pair of binoculars to her eyes. Aunt Mary being short-sighted, and Betty and Sally's vision being directed beneath the shade of their hollowed hands, he came

up without disturbing them, and Alberta cried, "Why, it's him! It's the Captain! Of course it is!" triumphantly, before she dropped the glasses and saw him in the flesh.

"It's *you* that Gerald is painting up there," she said reproachfully. "Why didn't you tell us? Kingsway Elevator and Milling Company. We never knew *you* had anything to do with Sunshine. Why didn't you tell us?"

"Well, yes, it is my Company," admitted the Captain sheepishly. "I thought you go-ahead people weren't interested in back-numbers. Is Robin anywhere about?"

"We are perfectly wretched about Robin," said Aunt Mary. "Of course you were mistaken. Gerald says a ballyhoo is one of those rough fellows that make such a noise—as if Robin——"

"Didn't you *know* he was there?" asked the puzzled Captain. "I'm beginning to see the situation. He was making a few dollars on the quiet, and never meant you to know. Well, here goes! I'll make a clean breast of it, and throw myself on the family's mercy."

"I saw Robin at the Fair. I know it was Robin, I tell you. He spoke to me, and told me that you were in the booth. Never mind if I did say I wasn't there yesterday. I had reasons. Never mind if it wasn't true. Shut up, Betty. Well, your young brother was about the first thing I did see. He had his mouth wide open, and a white hat on the back of his head, and a white shirt, and I'll bet his own mother would not have recognised him. But I knew the beggar. He was looking just like he did when he was a little kid and

opened his mouth to yell when he got a cricket-ball in his stomach. I got hold of him by the collar and gave him a bit of a shake to stop his row, and he gasped out that you were inside. That's where I began to make an ass of myself. I suppose you'll think it very funny. Betty, you're getting into an awful way of giggling. Nothing to giggle about.

"I—it's rather difficult to tell—when the young idiot said that—I—I concluded that you were part of the same outfit. It was a perfectly justifiable mistake. You know, Alberta, what a lot of rot you used to talk about the original things you were going to do, and the dollars you would make. And something reminded me of the tortoise—and the eft—you remember the eft?—and——"

"And we know the rest," put in Alberta, laughing in spite of dignity. "You then paid me the compliment of taking Mabel for me, and seizing her by the hair, which you believed to be mine! Thank you!"

"I deny the hair," said the Captain stiffly. "At least, you will allow that it was enough to upset my calculations a little when I discovered your respectable little brother in that capacity."

"I don't believe it," Alberta cried. "If you didn't know me, it is just as likely you made a mistake about Robin. You must have had us all on the brain."

"Not all," the Captain said meekly.

"Robin is working on a farm thirty miles off. We know he is, because he sent us his first week's wages. And Jake took the cat to him to be taken care of. If only Jake was here, he'd tell us just where the farm is. But it's quite a nice farm, and the woman is a nice motherly person."

"H'm. And you don't know where 'Jake' is to be found?"

Sally knew, it seemed, and produced the somewhat vague address of the township Thirty, fifteen eighteen.

"And it's quite near Robin's farm," she said eagerly. "Jake was going to pass it on the way home. That was why we got him to take the Meritorious Cat."

"I'll ride out there and look the lad up on the first opportunity. I want to see this Crane boy particularly."

"But you don't know Jake?" Sally said incredulously. "You talk as if you knew everybody."

"I spent a little time in these parts once, as I told you," said Kingsway patiently.

Betty expressed what the others were too polite to voice.

"Why, but that must be ages ago! Everybody you knew then would be a back-number now."

"That's so. Thank you for the reminder. I keep forgetting I'm a back-number," he said.

He exchanged glances with Aunt Mary. They met on common ground of sympathy. Was not she, too, an old gink?

"That's putting the case rather strongly," Alberta objected; "but what Betty is trying to say is that we've sort of got into another generation, you see?"

"I thought Betty expressed it to a T," Kingsway replied; "but sometimes you find good stories in back-numbers. I could tell you one about this young Crane, if you care to hear it."

"Yes, please tell us; and we'll stop you if we've heard it before. He's told us such lots of stories," Alberta said.

"I don't fancy he will have told you this one."

Kingsway sat down on the step, and lighted a cigarette to keep away the flies. "It was ten years ago. A very back-number date indeed. Crane was a youngster in his teens, just out from the Old Country, keen on becoming a cow-puncher, and rigged out like a circus, in Wild West togs—like—very like your brother Gerald."

"He doesn't wear those now," said Betty.

"There were five of us, prospecting this country,—there was no railway then here, you know,—and as it was dead winter, when water is the best and quickest route, we came south to Fort Whoopup by sleigh on the Belly River."

"Jolly!" put in Alberta, becoming interested.

"Oh, it was very jolly! It was forty below, and a beautiful blizzard to liven things up. You'd have enjoyed it immensely, I'm sure. Did you know that the mild and temperate winter of Alberta is interlarded with weather that equals the worst Canada can do?"

"Is it really? Oh, but, you know, the climate's changed quite a bit since those days—at least, that's what the old-timers say. It's on account of the smoke, and the march of civilisation, and all that kind of thing—they say it makes the winters much milder."

"Very likely," Kingsway went on, with a cryptic smile. "Well, we took young Crane along with us, as a sort of handy-man. He was new to the country, hadn't got a job, and was, in fact, pretty much up against it, and just beginning to find out that life wasn't going to be all beer and skittles. Some of the fellows objected to taking a youngster—said he'd get frozen, and be no end of a nuisance."

“ I’m sure he wasn’t a nuisance,” Sally said warmly.

“ As a matter of fact, the poor kid was a bit of an anxiety at first. But he learned sense all right. They do, if you take ‘em the right way, those English lads. He was good stuff.

“ We travelled south, as I said, by river. We had two teams, a big bobsleigh, which we used for the heavy baggage and stores, and generally two of us rode with the bob, while the other four went in the cutter ahead with the lighter and faster team. Of course, the big sleigh weighed a good lump, loaded up with all the camp accessories. You had to take a good lot of stuff with you in those days when you went prospecting. Of course, the cutter got along a good deal quicker than the bobsleigh, and it was our practice to let the cutter pioneer and get on ahead to fix a camping-place for the night. But—well, we must have all been rather green—we didn’t remember that a light cutter could go where a big heavy-laden bobsleigh couldn’t. That is, we didn’t think of it till we heard the poor horses scream, and the whole works dropped like a stone into the water through the rotten ice beneath us.

“ Folks told us afterwards that if there’d been six fools drowned, it would have been only just what was coming to them, which is Canadian for saying that it would have served us jolly well right. We might have known the beastly river was no good for sleighing. It’s no good for anything, this Belly River ; a real wicked, spiteful river, swift and still, and as cold as charity. The strongest rower can’t row against the stream ; the strongest swimmer can only just manage to cross it. And the ice, you see,

that looked so firm and thick, was a rotten fraud of ice and dust and snow, melted by Alberta's beloved Chinook, half melted and frozen over half a dozen times, until it was scarcely safe travelling for a boy's toboggan. We ought to have known, because we had passed a poor little coal-mining camp a bit higher up, and they were using the trail and the wooden traffic-bridge four miles round, when it would have saved them all of that just to lead their stuff across in sleighs to the village. However, we hadn't the sense to profit by other people's experience, and in we went, young Crane and I, with the load first, luckily for us, and the horses screaming on top of us.

"That was all of the story I could have told from my own experience. I don't even remember the kick on my head from one of the horses, though the print of the sharp-shod hoof is still there for a reminder."

He pushed the short hair back from his brow, where it grew a trifle longer, and showed a white scar in the temple.

"I've often noticed that," said Alberta. "It's like in *Redgauntlet*."

"The next thing I knew about anything was suffering the most excruciating pains I ever experienced, as I came unfritz, with two of the boys kneading and punching and rubbing snow in to help the process, and the rest doing the same for young Crane, who was in little better plight. But that boy had acted like a hero. He got clear of the lumber, as he told us later, and managed to wriggle through the struggling horses and muscle up to the top of a

chunk of broken ice. He must have been frozen almost stiff by then, but there was life enough in him to save my life. He got out of the bearskin robe that had done its little best to sink him, and plunged again in time to grab me by the head, as I floated loose on my long voyage under the ice to Hudson Bay. He grabbed me and kept me fast, how he didn't know; but that was how the other fellows found the two of us when they missed us, and got the idea that something must be wrong. It was getting dusk, and the cutter was going strong; it was touch and go they didn't drive straight over Crane's body, lying stiff across the ice, hanging on to my hair as I floated in the river beneath him. He was all but unconscious, and his fingers had frozen in my hair, which may have helped him to stick it out."

"How beautiful!" Sally drew a deep breath. "We always felt that Jake wasn't an ordinary person, didn't we, Betty?"

"And what became of him afterwards?" asked Alberta.

"We lost sight of him. I was always so awfully sorry. I was down with pneumonia after that, but Crane never turned a hair. And I and two of the others stayed on in Sunshine, because we'd lost our outfit, and couldn't get on for a time. That was how we came to look into things in this particular dump, and put some money into real estate here for a spec. But Crane wasn't interested in investments, having nothing to invest, and one day he announced he was going cow-punching for a rancher he'd dropped across, and he was gone without ten



minutes' notice. I didn't want to lose sight of him. It's the greatest piece of luck if your Crane is really the same chap."

"Of course it is!" Sally declared. "That's just the sort of splendid thing you could bet on him doing."

"It was splendid," Alberta said. "He ought to have had the Humane Society's medal. It was a good job you were saved too, wasn't it?"

"I thought so at the time. I've thought otherwise at times," said Kingsway moodily. "However, that's my story. Now, if some of you like to come with me, we'll take the rig up to the Fair ground, and see if there's any trace of Robin there."

There was room for everybody in the democrat, Aunt Mary being slim and quite content to be squeezed between her two youngest nieces, so they all went in quest of a solution to the mystery.

The Fair looked and sounded rather depressed. Half-hearted trotting-races were in progress, that seemed to consist chiefly of false starts; the trampled, dusty Midway was deserted, save for a few depressed Indians, looking for what they could pick up, and the people belonging to the side-shows, picking their teeth and wondering when business was going to look up. There was no ballyhoe to voice the Strange Girl, but then the Chinese Dragon gentleman was also dumb with a bread-and-cheese sandwich and a big mug of tea.

The Captain found Mistress Mabel, who had abandoned her "stage" costume for a one-piece dress of embroidered muslin almost as striking in its deficiencies, and decorated with open embroidery where it would have been more suitably opaque.

But she remembered the disturber without malice or resentment, and told all she knew of the young fellow who had done the "hollering" the day before.

It did not amount to much. She had not even asked the young man's name. They picked him up in town, and he rode out with them. He was a real good spieler, and they were doing good business, until he jumped on his pony and rode off without a word to anybody, and that was the last they had seen of him.

"Folks said it was like as if he'd gotten scared," said the girl. "He was taking off just as he was—no coat, and the white hat that's part of the property stuck on the back of his head, and 'Mabel' on a red ribbon hanging round his neck. Bert was just on time to see him shy the hat back on the fence, and an Indian picked it up and went off with it, so we lost that too. I guess that Injun is around with turkey's feathers stuck all over it some place. All he left was his coat, and you bet your sweet life that's not wuth two-bits."

"Had Robin a pony?" asked Kingsway, coming out of the tent to consult the others.

"No. It can't have been him," said Alberta. "I knew you were mistaken. But we had better see the coat, to make sure."

The coat was produced; and everybody's eyes rested on it in a short silence. There is something unmistakable about the old coat of somebody you know very well. It is almost as familiar as the person you have been used to associate with it, even when it is sun-faded and dust-whitened, and torn and covered

with bits of chaff, and has lost the belt that once buttoned round your brother.

Sally gave a little scream and said, "There, you see! It *was* Robin!" and Aunt Mary pushed up her spectacles and began to fold up the coat in a reverent manner, as if Robin was dead.

The Captain said, "Here, give me the beastly thing!" and stuffed it unceremoniously under the seat of the rig.

"There's nothing to cry about," he said. "Young ass can look after himself all right."

Alberta kept trying to say that Robin might quite possibly have sold the coat or given it away to somebody; but no one was listening, and the argument did not seem convincing enough even to comfort her own fears.

"How I wish we had never come to this dreadful place!" Aunt Mary sobbed. "Whatever shall we do, if he is lost on this dreadful prairie? And last night was bitterly cold. And he had no coat!"

"I wonder what scared him?" Betty said, as they drove home. "I didn't think Robin would be scared of anybody."

"I can understand that part of the business," Kingsway admitted reluctantly. "I fancy I was largely responsible for that."

Alberta's expression had been growing tragical with thought.

"I see it all now," she announced, as if a ray of light had pierced the darkness. "The whole thing's quite plain. He was ashamed to be seen—doing a kind of a menial task, by you—and you taunted him——"

"I didn't. I told him he was a young fool. And gave him a shake—yes, I own to that."

"Just ask yourself," Alberta went on. "Try to put yourself in his place. You are up against it in the country of your adoption—and willing, rather than be idle, to put your hand to anything that turns up. And then a person engages you as a hallyboe—ballyhoe, I mean. And you do that, because you know that no form of honest labour is despised in a country where everybody is a worker."

"Yes," said the Captain, "I'm imagining it. Go on!"

"Then," continued Alberta, worked up to greater eloquence by the quiet amusement in his eyes,—“then you see somebody looking cynical at you that used to be a friend of the family and try to boss everybody about when you were in happier circumstances. And your pride drives you anywhere—anywhere in the world—to get away from that sneering, cynical face, and that—that mocking voice making light of the humiliating position your desire to make good has forced upon you.”

"Bravo!" said the Captain. "But should you really call spieling for a side-show honest work, Alberta? You know, she wasn't *quite* the Strangest Girl in the World. I've seen lots stranger. And all the snakes had their fangs drawn."

"We must not leave a stone unturned till my brother is found," said Alberta stiffly, as if in rebuke of such flippancy.

Poor Kingsway, who was really very much distressed, was too much put out to say, as he wanted to, that he would not rest from scouring that indefinite

space, the prairie, till the lost one was found. The party reached home in silence and general ill-humour on the part of four members of the party, and in tears as regards Aunt Mary, ineffectually concealed between Sally and Betty on the back seat of the democrat.

## CHAPTER XVII

“ HULLO, SALLY ! ”

“ It must be the altitude,” Alberta observed, “ that makes things seem not quite so jolly and lively and like you expect them to be. Everything that we do falls flat.”

They were emptying the picnic-basket and washing up the little enamel cups and saucers, after a day spent down on the pebbly island in the river-bottom. The weather had been ideal, the mosquitoes and flies were all dead or gone to bed for the winter, the Captain had made a camp-fire and boiled the water in a lard-pail like an old-timer, and Aunt Mary had been dreadfully afraid of being drowned in fording the river backwater to reach the island behind the long-tailed, wild-eyed team of cayuses that Gerald would insist on driving instead of letting the Captain.

“ The Captain isn’t anything like so jolly as he was,” grumbled Alberta. “ He seems queer and—reserved—and not so chummy as he used to be.”

“ It’s because of Robin,” said Sally, with a sigh. “ That’s why we’re all miserable, and can’t enjoy things.”

They didn’t often speak of Robin now. He had gone right away without a sign or a word. It was all

so vague and mysterious and dreadful that the best thing they could do was to try not to conjecture what might have befallen him, and the mere mention of his name always made poor Aunt Mary begin to cry in such a hopeless, helpless way that the girls never spoke of him save in whispers when they were alone. It is so difficult to keep secrets in a frame-house. The partitions are so thin, and the hot-air shafts do such unexpected things in the way of conducting sound that what is whispered in the basement may come out a full-sized remark in the front bedroom.

So when Alberta began, "I've been wondering——" in a tentative way, Sally said, "H'sh!" for Aunt Mary was supposed to be having a nap upstairs, and they knew that meant she was standing at the window, staring out over the prairie, and watching for him to come back. They had often told her that it was quite impracticable to expect Robin to come back from the south, as he had gone north, and there was nothing but ranching-country between them and the States; the trail looked the right place for a wanderer to return along, and there was a wiggle in it which it was possible to imagine one long lost coming round the corner of. Aunt Mary continued, in spite of reasoning, to look out of the south window when she had nothing to do.

The girls went out to sit on the back-step, where they could watch the sunset, and nobody could overhear them.

"Has it struck you," said Alberta, "that Jake hasn't been to see us since Robin went away? I can't help wondering—if perhaps he knows something—something he wouldn't like to tell us. Of course, it's only an idea."

"It's nearly a month," said Sally. "It *is* rather odd. I wish the Captain had had time to find Jake before he went to the Hat."

Captain Kingsway had gone to Medicine Hat, as the *Hat Clarion* put it, "to look after his business interests in that locality," that day, and had taken Gerald with him, to the great elation of that promising young architect, to introduce him to the Board of Directors of the Kingsway Elevator and Milling Company, with a view to installing him in the employ of that influential body in a professional capacity. It was a piece of "graft" that went against the grain a little, but there wasn't a better man on the spot, and Gerald had plenty of ability, if it were put in the proper channel.

The Elevator and Milling Company was going to make things a great deal better for the struggling wheat-growers of that district. While there was some doubt as to how it was going to pay the promoters, there was no question at all that it was a great benefit to the farmer to have all these new elevators going up to take the grain from the yearly doubled area of wheat-producing land. People said that the new enterprise was going to make the combine that owned the existing elevators and controlled the prices sit up and take notice, but what everybody was at a loss to realise was the motive from a commercial standpoint. That those English financiers who had an interest in the country, men who had benefited greatly by the wonderful development going on in the country, should be working this matter solely to benefit the grain-growers who were doing the pioneer work, was an idea that the Canadian found it impossible to



entertain in the limited space he called his "think-tank."

So the Captain went one week grumbling to Calgary, and the next by the midnight train to Macleod, and now was off to Medicine Hat to see to some troublesome legal business about a contract, and the girls and Aunt Mary had the place to themselves.

They didn't feel quite so forlorn and far away from everybody as they might have done, however, because now there was a tall pine-post opposite the house, and more at intervals, till they came to those that ran along the trail, and a wire connected Buffalo Cottage with the rest of Sunshine and the rest of the world far beyond their ken that was spoken of technically as Long Distance.

The young people had been quite content to live in hope for the urban telephone to be brought out, a matter of years rather than of months, when the luxury would have been procurable at the expense of a few dollars only. But the Captain was not fond of waiting, and he said he wanted to talk to them when he was away, so he had them connected with the Rural District line, a wild expenditure. It was a comfort to know that he and Gerald could ring them up at any time when they were away, and that they could order groceries and things, or call the doctor if necessary, without having to go all the way into Sunshine.

The telephone-man had just gone away before Aunt Mary went to take her nap, and they had inspected the new possession with interest, but had not been able to think of anybody to try it on.

Think of it! They had been living four months in

this Canadian town, and at the end of it could remember nobody with whom they were on friendly enough terms to make a trial-call on the new telephone ! It speaks volumes of the so much vaunted hospitality of Canada, and the welcome extended to the stranger that is within her gates.

However, there was the Captain to talk to on it, and he had promised to ring them up when he got to Medicine Hat.

Now, Alberta's connection with the *Booster* had made her quite an expert in dealing with the apparatus which Aunt Mary regarded in the light of a kind of infernal machine ; and it was unfortunate that immediately after the conversation lately set down, she perceived that her latest acquisition and care, a couple of young geese, were setting out due west with a determination that looked as if it would hold out till they got to the Rockies at least. She had no sooner got out of earshot, taking a wide sweep to round up the ramblers, than the telephone-bell went for the first time ; Sally sprang to her feet and ran for it, as if it were alive and liable to run away if she lost any time.

It was a dead heat between Sally and Aunt Mary ; but Aunt Mary withdrew thankfully, saying " Oh, you do it ! I can't bear the thing."

Sally grabbed the receiver with some trepidation, and was requested to speak to Long Distance.

" What is it ? " asked Aunt Mary, in the ear that was not applied to the receiver.

" It must be the Captain at Medicine Hat. Isn't it wonderful ? Hush ! "

Then a far-away voice floated through the receiver.

"Hullo! Is that Alberta? This is me, you know."

"Yes. At least it's Sally. Alberta's gone to send the geese back. Ought it to be buzzing like this?"

"It's Crane speaking, you know. Jake Crane. I say——"

Inaudible mutterings followed.

"Oh, Jake! Is it really you! Oh, how wonderful! Shut up, please, *do*!"

"What for?"

"Oh, not you! Aunt Mary will keep buzzing in my ear. Go on, where are you?"

"I'm at Bassano. And, I say, Sally—I only wanted to explain—but have you heard—Robin——"

Sally nearly dropped the receiver, and gave a little cry.

"It's *not* the Captain. It's Jake. And he's saying—something about Robin. Oh, do go away, Aunt Mary dear! I know it's something dreadful. I'll tell you later. I can't—hear properly. Yes! Go on—about Robin?"

"I'm most awfully sorry," went on the far-away voice, a miserable voice. "It's beastly having to tell you like this. But I want to get it over. Say you'll forgive me! Haven't you heard anything?"

"Oh, *where* is he? What has happened?" cried Sally. "Go away, Aunt Mary!"

"I don't know. Killed, I'm afraid. I know it was my fault. I feel such a brute. You won't see him alive again, I'm afraid. And it's all my fault. You'll never forgive me. And I've had such a stroke of luck—Sally——"

Then it was that Aunt Mary, who was absolutely

dancing with excitement, accidentally put her hand on the lever, and cut off the communication with a loud quack in a penitent ear far away at Bassano.

There is something very decisive, final, and crushing in the quack that cuts a telephone communication in two amidships. Jake hung up the receiver, and like the lover in the poem, "bitterly weeping, he turned away."

But he was not exactly weeping; he indulged in the twentieth-century equivalent, and as he turned away from the 'phone, he said, "—— the Cat!"

For how was he to know that Sally was holding on to the receiver and bawling, "Hello—hello—hello——" into space, quite unconscious of what Aunt Mary had done.

Aunt Mary kept herself from fainting by a supreme effort, and when Alberta came on the scene, she was trying to drag Sally's hands away from her face, and begging her to tell her everything—everything—that Jake had said. And so, between imploring and scolding, all the scraps of talk were pieced together, and they looked at one another with white faces and startled eyes, saying, "Something has happened—but what?"

"If only the Captain were here!" sobbed Aunt Mary. As if in answer to the wish, a little later, the telephone-bell set all their hearts beating wildly. It *was* the Captain this time, speaking from Medicine Hat, with nothing very much to say, and it was some relief to pour the alarming news into his ear.

"Jake Crane told Sally he had done something dreadful to Robin—and we shall never see him alive again—he didn't know where he was. And then Sally

must have cut him off, for we couldn't get on again, and we didn't know where to ring him up."

The Captain said it sounded a rummy tale.

"I shouldn't take too much notice of it," he advised. "Crane may be off his chump with living alone, and having visions. You can't tell. I'll go to Bassano from here, and try to get into touch with him and get a proper tale. If there has been any kind of foul play, I don't think Crane would be a bit likely to be mixed up in it."

He promised to send Gerald home to them, while he himself went north to Bassano, and they were to cheer up, and not cry, and he would very likely bring Robin back with him.

Of course, nobody did cheer up, and they all cried a great deal, particularly Sally, who kept saying, "He's dreadfully sorry, poor Jake! Whatever it is that he's done, he's most awfully sorry."

The calm of desperation had settled upon Aunt Mary. She packed up her brush and comb and toothbrush in readiness for she knew not what. After that they missed her for some time; and Sally found her kneeling in the little room that was waiting for Robin, with the bedclothes turned down each day ready for the boy that was so long coming; and they both knelt there together for a bit, and felt comforted.

Kingsway and Gerald held council together at the depot at Medicine Hat, as they waited for the Captain's train. They both looked very grave. They had made up plenty of theories to explain it, but none of the theories could get around the horrible suspicion that poor Robin had been the victim of either foul play or some bad accident.

"They were harvesting. They may have run against some tough customers, celebrating. Or they may have got fighting over poker. What way does it take Robin when he gets a skinful?"

"He was awfully sick the only time I know of," said Gerald, "and anybody could have knocked him on the head then. He couldn't have lifted a finger to save himself."

"There are plenty of fellows knocking about who would not think twice about putting a bullet into a lad for the sake of a few dollars," Kingsway said. "But not Crane—if he knew anything, he would surely have come forward. Mind, not a word to frighten your poor Aunt!"

He went off to Bassano in a sad state of mind, blaming himself bitterly for attending to business when he might have been out scouring the country for the missing Robin. He had really done what amounted to the last word in searching for him weeks ago, when he requested the Mounted Police Detachment at Sunshine to look for such a young man as Robin West, last seen "riding a bay pony in a boiled shirt and no coat." He had not been very much surprised when those sleuth-hounds failed to find any trace of him, for he had his own theory that the boy had joined the ranks of the "wilful-missing" and would turn up as soon as whatever prank he was up to had grown stale.

The Quartermaster-Sergeant at Bassano remembered the Captain very well, and the little force made all kind of inquiries in all kinds of likely and unlikely places. They traced the long-distance call through the telephone operator to a Chinese restaurant in the

town; and got no satisfaction from the proprietor beyond the fact that an unknown customer had paid for a long-distance call the day before.

The Police Detachment turned the town of Bassano inside out in search of Jake Crane, and found never a trace of him, for the simple reason that he was then riding quietly back to his homestead, sixty miles to the south-west, without the faintest suspicion that he was wanted by the police.

After two days of searching and questioning, they were still completely in the dark, and the police had energetically sought high and low in the neighbourhood of Bassano for Robin West, alive or dead, in his own, or any other name he chose to go by. All these measures resulting in nothing at all, Kingsway got tired of reporting no progress to the anxious household at Buffalo Cottage, and on the third day, leaving the search in active operation, returned to Sunshine to take up the thread at that end.

He found them all very much worn with anxiety and suspense. Aunt Mary seemed slimmer and slighter than ever, and flitted about like an apologetic shadow of an aunt, always peering towards the door for the chance of Robin coming. And the girls were looking big-eyed and white-faced; and there was no fun or laughter in the house at all, and a slight air of reproach was about, because Kingsway had been the very last person to see Robin alive, and he had spoken harshly to him, and frightened him away from the Fair.

He felt a brute; he was also annoyed with himself for being so helpless in the matter, for he was not a man easily rebuffed by failure. There he was, practically at the end of his resources, impatiently waiting

for Gerald to return. Gerald had done what Kingsway blamed himself for not doing before. He had gone out to find Jake's homestead and the farm where Robin was supposed to have worked, and to pick up what news he could of either. Kingsway had written to Jake, but with little hope of his letter being delivered.

In the meantime, it struck the Captain that while "the boys" were hunting Sunshine round for traces of Robin, nothing had yet been said in that quarter regarding Jake Crane, and he added that mysterious absentee to the list of "wanted."

They were a very melancholy little family indeed. Kingsway tried to appear hopeful and light-hearted with a very poor result. Alberta was especially tearful and repentant.

"It's all through me," she would say. "If we had never come here, we should be all safe at home in dear old Craven Bridge. Robin getting up the football club for the season, and Aunt Mary doing the Sowers' Band, and me and Sally doing up our evening-frocks, and Betty away at school, and Gerald saying pieces of *Richard the Third* practising for the dramatic club. If only Uncle Richard had stopped alive a little longer, we should never have had the lots and wanted to come here."

"It's very likely all for the best," said the Captain.

"Oh, how can you say so!" cried poor Alberta. "And Robin perhaps lying dead under a hedge somewhere!"

The Captain waved a hand comprehensively over the prairie.

"At least there are no hedges," he said.

Aunt Mary brightened a little.



" No, Alberta. The Captain is quite right. That's quite comforting. I've been feeling so unhappy about that. Of course, it *is* quite impossible for anybody to be dead under a hedge, or in a ditch even ! "

" If it hadn't been for me," continued Alberta dolefully, " he would never have made friends with that Crane man, and all this wouldn't have happened."

" Oh, do cheer up, my dear girl," implored Kingsway. " If it hadn't been for you, I should never have come out here again. And I can tell you I've found work waiting for me—lots of work that I ought to have been doing while I've been doing nothing—wasting years out of my life—well, nearly two years it was after my wound was all right."

" And the Captain *knows* Jake," pleaded Sally. " He was quite a proper person to make friends with, wasn't he ? "

" It was ten years ago," Kingsway said, with a sigh. " Ten years may make a big change in a man."

Sally's imploring eyes constrained him to add, " But I would have taken any odds on that boy turning out all right, as I knew him."

" He's sorry, whatever it is," said Sally miserably.

" Now, why the Dickens," Kingsway reflected, " is Sally sticking up for Crane, and Alberta down on him ? It ought to be the other way about. Unless—yes, that's it—Alberta's foxing this severe attitude to cover up her feelings. Sally is too much of a kid to have thought of that."

He went back to his comfortless quarters at the Pallas Hotel with a furrow in his brow that was not altogether caused by the mystery of Robin.

Everything was wearisome and fruitless and depressing ; as depressing as the great lonely waste of prairie, with the crude town, a drop in the ocean, making the spaces around it seem more hopeless and untamable than ever.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE MERITORIOUS CAT JUSTIFIED

It happens not infrequently that he who does not know he is pursued hides himself more effectually by pure accident than the man who disappears by actual design, and so it was with Jake Crane, homesteader in good standing of Township Thirty, range fifteen-eighteen.

A bunch of range-cattle had strayed across his land, and Jake, recognising the brand as that of a rancher near Bassano, had rounded them up and driven them in to their owner. Time is not a valuable asset with the homesteader, and Jake knew the boss of the "lazy D and fry-pan" would pay up for the service of returning the strays.

Which explains quite innocently his presence in the town of Bassano, whither he had ridden very happily with a letter in his pocket which he had read many times, and which opened up all kinds of new possibilities in prospect.

Dave Skelton had borrowed his team to go to Sunshine a day or two ago, and brought back Jake's scanty mail, a neighbourly service which each did for the other, on their rare visits to town.

Skelton was reduced to borrowing now, for he was a

ruined man, cleaned out, not a beast left on the place ; nothing but the bare, heavily mortgaged acres that would very soon go too. And Skelton was a sad man, and a man without hope. Jake had had him on his mind a good deal of late. He had made a point of riding over to Dave's place for a smoke and a chat, or, if talking brought on old memories, the two would pass an hour or two with a greasy pack of well-thumbed cards.

When Jake went over for his team, as he had arranged that morning, he found Dave sitting moody and morose before a table littered with papers.

"Lawyers," he said shortly. "And bills overdue."

Jake thought he glanced towards the wall where his rifle hung. He was uneasy as he rode back with his own letter.

It was not often Jake had a letter, and this was not an Old Country letter, though the writing had a curiously Old Country look. It could not be from an implement man, or a grocer, or a Real Estate office, which comprised the bulk of his correspondence.

It was from Kingsway. Kingsway, the kind-hearted, genial Englishman who had held out a helping hand to a youngster in distress all those years ago. And he was back in Sunshine, wanting to help him again ; saying, and what rot it was, to be sure ! that he had never forgotten that he owed his life to Crane, that night on the Belly River.

"What rot !" Jake thought. "Why, but for him, I'd have died of exposure, sleeping round in baggage

cars before that. Or had to give myself up for a vag. I was up against it that time, I cert'nly was. And here he wants me—wants me to take up a responsible position—why, what can I *do*? I wouldn't be any good. But—it's decent of him—it's jolly decent of him. I guess I'll go if it's only to see him again. He *was* a white man, was Kingsway, white from the word go!"

So off Jake jogged to Bassano full of pleasant anticipations, and figuring, as he went along, that there might be a few things, after all, that a fellow like himself might be quite useful for in a modest way. These pleasant thoughts lasted him all the way to Bassano, and would have taken him home in the same pleasant frame of mind, but for the sight of the telephone in the Chinese restaurant where he supped in that town.

For the agreeable reflections led to others more agreeable still, as, for instance, that whereas an Aunt might consider a poor homesteader a quite undesirable suitor for her pretty niece, a person in a responsible position was an apple off quite another tree.

This phase of meditation led quite naturally to Sally, and that without any jumping off by way of Alberta.

Rip, who had once been "all their dog," pushed his shaggy head between Jake's knees, as he sat thinking and smoking. He was Jake's dog now, and loved him with a whole-hearted devotion, though it was little more than a month since he had yelped himself hoarse and all but strangled himself to get away to a girl crossing a river on a grey pony.

Jake looked at Rip, and the cool morning and its

leave-taking came back to him very vividly. He looked into the little dog's treacle eyes, and saw his own face in their calm depths.

"I guess Sally's seen herself in your eyes lots of times, old man," thought Jake. "I can see her now, with her dear little face all pink with trying not to cry, and that tear that fell on your ear for all her trying."

Alberta was different now; there was more pride and reserve to Alberta. Hadn't she looked splendid when it stormed, and the hailstones bruised her shoulders! And how kind she could be when she chose! And how tender and womanly she was all the time, with all her pretty pride and affectation of worldly wisdom.

And, oh, thought Jake, was it the least bit likely, that the mildest, meekest, gentlest of Aunts would encourage a poor rough teamster with one coat to his back and barely fifty dollars in the world to raise presumptuous eyes to one or other of those delectable nieces?

But it was no good staring any longer into Rip's treacle orbs, for no amount of thinking could conjure up Alberta or Sally into them, when the little frames were both full of his own puzzled, red, honest face.

It was then that Jake's eye fell on the telephone.

"They'll be in the new house by now," he thought. "They may be connected by now. I wonder if I could get them? I'd like to get that business of the cat off my mind."

And five minutes later he went out of the restaurant with all the pleasant thoughts squashed quite flat, because, as he very reasonably believed, Sally had

banged down the receiver and cut him off short just when he was waiting to hear her say that he wasn't to blame a bit, and that accidents would happen ; or anything else that a civilly spoken young lady ought to have said to her penitent cat-keeper.

Off he rode to his homestead gloomily enough, feeling that he was cut off from friendship in that quarter altogether, cursing the Poor but Meritorious Cat from the bottom of his heart, and pitying himself for a lonely, misjudged, and unfriended young man.

He started for his homestead without the faintest intention of covering up his tracks ; and he happened to cover them very effectually, for half the distance out he changed his plan, and spent the night with a man who owed him ten dollars, quite three hours' ride out of the way. The man was unable to pay, and the detour brought him out nearer to Dave Skelton's place than his own.

The sight of Dave's pretentious, iron-roofed, empty barn put a thought into Jake's head which drove his own troubles into the background.

"Guess I'll go and see if the old man's all right," he said, and his pony freshened at sight of the buildings, for he knew it meant a halt.

All was quite quiet and still, not a creature stirring, not a sign of life about the desolate place. Jake shuddered involuntarily as he drew nearer the house. It was near eight of a fine fresh fall morning ; but it might as well have been the middle of the night, for any sound that broke the stillness. Then Jake remembered that there was not a creature about the place ; everything had been sold to pay the creditors, even the few

chickens that had kept house for themselves in the big barn.

As he crossed the ring-fence, his heart gave a big throb. The door stood ajar; and it gave the last touch of desolation to the scene. Jake felt as if his feet would never drag themselves across that sinister threshold into the silent house; his eyes were fighting with his will not to be forced to look around the open door.

He went in; he could not force his voice to shout. He felt that there was something inside the house that could neither hear nor speak.

The place was just as he had left it. The papers lay on the bare table, just as he had seen them last; and there, lying back in his chair—his head thrown back, one arm hanging limp by his side—Dave Skelton—asleep?—or——

The rifle lay on the floor across his feet; Jake had last seen it hanging on the wall. He stepped nearer, and looked tremblingly into the lined face of the man. He had never realised how old a fellow Dave Skelton was getting.

No, this was not Death! Not violent death. Jake had seen Death in many places; and he knew at a glance that He was not here. It was sleep; a deep, weary sleep; he could see now the faint rise and fall of the nostrils, the quiver of an eyelid; and he saw then the strangest thing of all.

A cat lay on the sleeper's knee; a black-and-white cat, stretched comfortably across his legs; the man's gnarled hand was half buried in the creature's dense fur, and the deep vibration of its comfort throbbed through the room in a soothing undertone.



"The Meritorious One, or I'm a Dutchman!" exclaimed Jake.

The sleeping man awoke; but the Meritorious Cat dug claws deeper and slept on.

Dave laughed, looked at the gun, which Jake stooped for quickly, and then laughed again, a low, rueful laugh.

"Put it up, lad. I'm through that madness. Say, I guess I been asleep. I must have slept all night. It's daylight."

"Near eight," said Jake. "And say, Dave! you've got my cat! Where'd you get that?"

"It's the strangest thing, boy," said the old man. "I guess you'll be saying I'm ripe for Ponoka if I tell you. I was settin' right here, right where I am; close on dark, an' monkeying with that there gun; and well, it warn't wanting to live on that kep' me from making the end on it that I had in mind. I'd put in two cartridges—and I sat on thinking things over, as any man might do, before he quits life across lots.

"Now, see to here, boy! I guess God Almighty sent that creature right here. I never saw it—it come in without a sound. It shoved its round, soft head plumb in my hand—it browsed on me and rubbed its sides and started a-purring and thrumming fit to bust itself. I've been asleep—I reckon I dropped off after I got the thing on my knee, stroking it. I sure know God sent it."

"I guess!" acquiesced Jake solemnly. "And I guess you don't stay here by your lonesome, Dave Skelton, so come right along to my place and lend me a hand with my shingling. That's my cat, any-

way. I bet you don't give me the slip again, Mr. Cat ! ”

Thus did the Poor but Meritorious Cat justify his high-sounding title and the wild expense of his importation.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A HOME HELP

It must not be supposed that high life in such a flourishing centre as Sunshine was at a standstill because a foolish young Englishman had vanished, and his equally foolish relatives and friends were in such a state of mind.

Mr. Alan Fayce, of Fayce & Frite, photographers, had vanished too, for the matter of that, but it would be unreasonable to expect such trifles to make a difference to the gay doings of the Four Hundred.

And since a young Englishwoman had left her native shores with the simple-minded intention of marrying this Mr. Fayce who had disappeared, the result was one more recruit to the small army of "mother's helps" so greatly in demand in that land of Opportunity.

It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and the freakish blast that had whiffled Mr. Fayce out of the ken of his fiancée provided Mrs. Spender, of Burlington House, Fourth Avenue South, with a particularly nice-looking maid just in time for her monthly At Home.

But there is always a fly in the amber if you look closely enough, and here we find Mrs. Spender

entertaining her callers to a recital of her domestic arrangements. There are not many callers yet, because it is only just four o'clock, and as everybody knows who knows what is what, the proper hour for receiving is from five to six, and those who do not hit the happy mean get no tea.

Laura, in the kitchen, had strict orders not to brew the tea a minute before five.

"The worst of it is, she's Eng-lish," complained Mrs. Spender. "I'm always saying I won't hev an Eng-lish girl again. But it's vurry difficult to get an Amurrican or Canadian girl that will wash. And they want such wages! My! The last girl!"

"I'd never give it to an Eng-lish gurl," said the caller. "They're tickled to death if they get twelve dollars a month, and quite as much as they're wuth to any person."

"I should say! The Eng-lish are poor tools. What *are* they wuth? They ain't never seen nothing, as you might say. This gurl, now, never saw a proper stove. 'Ow,' she says, 'in Eng-land we don't hev fireplaces like that!'"

A scream of laughter greeted the imitation of the new domestic's awe.

"You know," quoth one stout dame in generous extenuation, "I guess I rather like the Eng-lish twang!"

"I'd pass over the twang, you betcher, if she'd got any notion of cooking. My! Cook a Canadian breakfast. You bet, it'd jar you to see her buck-wheat-cakes! 'I'm vurry sorry they're not right,' mimicking again. 'We don't hev these things to breakfast in Eng-land.'"

"Can she wash though? That sort cain't generally."

"She'll hev to if she stops here. And she'll hev to do it Canadian style too. I won't hev any Eng-lish ways in my ho-am! She came out mighty fine in an Eng-lish shirt waist and tie—you know the style. I just ask' her, 'How long hev you been in this Wustern country?' She said about two months. 'Vurry well,' I said, 'I guess you been long enough to learn how folks dress out here.' She didn't say anything to that; but, my, fancy a girl that looks fit to cry if you say half a word! Her under-wear's English too, every stitch."

Laura was in the kitchen. When we realise that this kitchen, ten feet by twelve, opened out of the dining-room, twelve foot square, which in turn was divided by a curtain of loops of green cord from the drawing-room, twelve by fourteen, where this conversation was going on, it will be perceived that not much was lost on the way.

Laura did not greatly care. To overhear everything that was said in the house was one of the advantages that she had heard were to be enjoyed by the much-to-be-envied domestic help in Canadian homes.

So she had been led to understand when she had her sleeves cut short and went to work for her bread in what the immigration literature aptly described as "woman's peculiar and honoured sphere."

Laura heard it all, but she had heard it before, and, like Charlotte, she went on cutting bread-and-butter. It is not easy to cut thin bread-and-butter from a new loaf that is nearly all holes; but there

was nothing for it but bread-and-butter, because the layer-cake which she had been ordered to make for tea had come out of the oven quite flat, with a yellow canal up the middle, and there was no time to try again.

She had not improved matters by saying, "I'm really very sorry. I never made a layer-cake in England. And our oven at home used to bake things underneath, instead of burning them on the top."

Canada might fittingly be termed the Land of Lost Illusions. Laura had very quickly lost all hers as to the pleasant, homelike atmosphere of a Canadian home. Also that, fostered by the inviting little books, of the place occupied by the valued and respected help as a member of the family.

Life at Mrs. Spender's seemed one long scrimmage, with very little room to scrimmage in. There was a small house which required a great deal of human effort to keep it tidy and clean, and a great many people tumbling over one another without getting it done.

Mrs. Spender, stout and ponderous, was a crowd herself in the tiny kitchen. She, the kitchen cabinet, the stove, and two chairs filled it quite as full as was comfortable. Add two Miss Spenders, fortunately of slight build, one ironing a waist on the end of the kitchen cabinet, while the other stirred what she called "taffy" over the stove, and Master Spender, in overalls, washing at the sink because his father was shaving in the bathroom; and pity poor Laura struggling in the midst of all this to serve a midday dinner in the little dining-room, and murmuring that she didn't

know they wanted tea. "We don't have tea at lunch in England."

Whenever they were all out, or sitting down for a few minutes, Laura would seize the opportunity to wash the oilcloth. There was oilcloth all over the house, beginning at the front door and going right through to the back, and they walked about so much that it was in a chronic state of wanting washing.

Between the meals and the floor and the washing up, she had not yet fulfilled that clause in her engagement which stipulated that she was to sew in her spare time.

She knew now what Mr. Kipling meant in the poem by the "five-meal, meat-fed men." It was not so much the meat that bothered her as the changeless combination at every meal of tea and meat and potatoes and sweets. Mrs. Spender rang the changes on twelve dishes week in, week out, and we may not gloss over the sad truth that Laura spoilt the lot. But then, she had never professed that she could cook. She had not been much of a hand at it in England, and everything was quite different here.

Different from England: she had expected that. But oh, how different from poor lonely English Laura's idea of Canada! The free life, the absence of conventionality, the homely, hospitable men and women, the satisfaction of knowing that here one might work with one's hands and not forfeit respect or civility—how swiftly was the illusion fled!

It was not altogether the cramped accommodation, the stifling, airless closet under the rafters where there was scarcely space to make her narrow camp-bed—Laura thought it was a plank-bed, but then she was

not a militant suffragette, or she would have known better. It was not the utter lack of privacy, the total absence of any attempt at comfort in the kitchen arrangements of that smart little house.

It was an utter unhomelikeness ; a restlessness without energy throughout the day ; a running about without any prospect of getting " through," and a horrible, desolate sense of being alone in a crowd.

Laura had been in the house a week before she realised the truth that not a soul had spoken to her except to give her orders, and set her many mistakes right, and be " tickled to death " at the stupidity of a person who did not know how beds were made in Canada, was ignorant of the use of berry-saucers, and said that in England you didn't stuff wild-duck with sage and onions.

Mrs. Spender and her daughters all made themselves very busy about the house in the intervals of talking " over the 'phone," and sallying forth in splendour to afternoon teas and occasional supper-parties, and on state occasions receiving in style and dignity.

Laura was in the background, very starchy in cap and apron, to carry in the tea on little trays ; but she did not open the door, as there was a prim little girl of eight or nine, with her hair tied on top in a huge bow, who appeared afterwards as " a dainty little door-opener in white lingerie relieved with geranium ribbons."

A lady in the height of fashion, and plenty of powder and a frilled apron the size of a postage stamp, relieved the hostess of the difficult task of cutting the ices, and still another took from the menial hands of Laura the " tea-hour trifles " and dispensed them to the multitude.



They were all very smart, and they talked a good deal of scandal. There was never a man to be seen at these afternoon gatherings. The women would shut themselves in, sometimes from two o'clock to six, and play bridge with the ferocity of tigers for a trophy that might have cost a quarter. And the uninvited guest at every gathering was the pushful young lady from Chatham, Ont., who was making a roaring success of Alberta's dismal failure as "Au Fait." Into this young lady's willing ear the fashionable folk poured alluring descriptions of their own gowns, and Laura made her one and only appearance in the *Booster's* Social columns in the sentence: "A neatly-gowned waitress was a pleasing innovation, and handed the toothsome dainties to the deft assistants."

There was also a memorable orgie when Mr. Spender, gloriously drunk, with two comrades, also gloriously drunk, returned from what was described as a hunting-party with a quantity of wild-duck, and a duck-supper took place duly, and was blazoned forth in the *Booster* as usual. It would have been more fitly called a duck-day, for between plucking ducks, disembowelling ducks, stuffing ducks, cooking ducks, and eating ducks, the premises and every member of the family fairly reeked of duck for weeks.

There was only one course to that supper—duck, and more duck, and "then some —and they swilled it down with tea and stuffed it down with potatoes. Laura thought it was rather a disgusting way of accounting for fourteen brace that ought to have been hung for a fortnight; but the family were delighted, and described the affair as "the whole thing."

Wash-day was the sorest trial of all ; though she had expressed herself as willing, as indeed she was more than willing, to do washing or anything else that was required of her. Mrs. Spender and her daughters hunted up a miscellaneous collection, which Laura tied neatly in a sheet and carried downstairs.

"And where is the wash-house, please, ma'am?" asked the bewildered daughter of an Oxford Don. She asked the question in all innocence, for she had no experience of that indefinite ceremony, "the washing," apart from the knowledge that it was usually carried on in the wash-house.

Mrs. Spender was angry. She said that Laura had to learn that in Canada she was not going to have everything made easy for her. She had to learn how to work now, and it would have been better for her if she had learned when she was young, as Mrs. Spender had done. In this she spoke truth, for it was common knowledge that the good lady had washed dishes at Sunshine's first hotel, and scrubbed the floors of the first apartment house, when women were scarce in the West and Spender a struggling bar-tender.

But let us get on with the washing.

Laura had looked forward with some perturbation to making her first personal acquaintance with those common but useful implements, the dolly-tub and peggy—washing machine and wringer.

It was even more perturbing to find that a Canadian home contained none of these things, and that the washing was divided between the bath, which was on the ground floor, and the kitchen sink, and boiled in an enamel pan on the stove while the rest of the family got dinner ready. There was not even a

scullery, and Laura was making a dreadful mess and slop over her first washing, and when it was hung on the line it was far from clean, though she had used a whole packet of Golden West.

There was one advantage to be found in life as Mrs. Spender's help : it allowed very little time to think ; and Laura wanted fervently not to think. It was not only Mr. Fayce that she was afraid to think of, and her disappointment and hurt pride on finding that that gentleman had incontinently bolted on her advent. There was also the painful hope that he would turn up, a justifiable hope when so energetic a Sherlock Holmes as Gerald West was engaged in the quest.

And then there was the pleasant memory of that Atlantic passage, and the thought of a handsome, brown-eyed, crisp-haired chivalrous boy who was *not* Mr. Fayce, and must therefore not be allowed often into the thoughts of a girl who ought to have been hoping that Mr. Fayce would come back and clear everything up. It will be easily understood that Laura, being so perplexed that she did not know what she hoped or dreaded most, was very near her wits' end, and, in fact, on the verge of hysterics ; although of course, we are far from wishing to urge this in extenuation of what was really very unbecoming conduct.

It so chanced that Laura, wringing out flannelette sheets in the bath, let a few tears fall in private into the water, and, coming into the passage to give the sheets a shake, her eyes being still dim, flapped them in the face of her mistress in full sail down the passage. This was bad enough, but, to add to the enormity of the offence, the tears gave way to helpless laughter

that refused to be bottled up again, and that, as Mrs. Spender rightly declared, was "*the* lim-ut." "And take that from an Eng-lish gurl! Not for mine!"

An hour later a much-travelled cabin-trunk stood in the backyard of Mrs. Spender's residence, as far from the house as its dispirited owner could drag it single-handed; and another useless English girl wandered forth into Sunshine to look for another opportunity.

It seems hardly fair to tell that Laura was crying as she left Fourth Avenue, for she held her head very high and walked very fast lest anybody should suspect it. A copy-book maxim was repeating itself in Laura's mind: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again."

"If only people weren't so unkind!" Laura thought. "And if only one had the slightest idea where to begin!"

The *Booster* seemed the only feasible means to another opening, and she expended five cents on that day's issue out of her ten days' wages. She had a faint recollection that if her own mother had wished to get rid of an undesirable maid so summarily she would have felt obliged to pay her a whole month's wages; but then the law was probably different in Canada, and as Mrs. Spender had mentioned that she was the fourth English girl she had treated the same way, Laura concluded that she was more experienced in the matter than herself.

There were several likely advertisements in the *Booster*, and she stiffened her back and fought down a wild longing to run across the prairie to Buffalo

Cottage and pour her troubles into Aunt Mary's sympathetic ear. Gerald would be so indignant, and indignation on one's behalf is so very comforting. But they had been so kind, and sheltered her for ever so long, and she knew they had troubles of their own, and she didn't want to go back beaten without another attempt to fight her own battle.

Besides—besides, she knew very well that all her other reasons for wishing to go there were capped and overbalanced by a great longing for Gerald's kind eyes and protecting tenderness; and that kind of feeling was a thing to crush resolutely out of being when she had crossed the Atlantic for love of Alan Fayce.

So she took the fragments of her courage in both hands and applied for another situation.

She was successful. It was a small, new, white wooden house, with a very green bit of lawn and a pair of high-heeled rubbers lying on the verandah. The tinkle of ragtime floated through the door as she waited. A small, young, white-faced woman in a pink and blue crinkled paper kimono dressing-wrapper admitted her and engaged her on the spot. Laura rather liked the pathetic, dark-eyed, frail little woman, more like a slight girl of sixteen than a matron, and did not stick out for more than the proffered twelve dollars a month. It seemed to be a haven of rest to a homeless girl, but it turned out to be wash-day again in the morning.

"Ma husband is coming home to-night," her mistress said. "I'd hate to have washing about when ma husband comes home."

So Laura did the washing in the bath and sink as before, and got done quicker, because there were not

so many people tumbling over one another, and her mistress was obliging enough to go and get on with what she called "ma music" while Laura had a clear field. Towards evening she left the piano to order a T-bone steak on the telephone from the butcher, "and it must be real good, for ma husband's coming to-night," Laura heard in a triumphant pæan.

She had changed the kimono now for a baby frock of embroidered muslin, and her little sticks of arms looked pathetically thin and undeveloped. Her small head was, moreover, crowned with a towering mass of black rolls and puffs of hair, that dwarfed the pallid, insignificant face out of all proportion.

She thought the little woman was in a state alternating between very happy and miserably anxious, and after six o'clock, every few minutes she would ring up the depot to ask if the train was in from the Hat.

At last the train *was* in from the Hat, and Laura turned the T-bone steak for the last time, and was glad that the little bride was soon to be out of suspense.

She was waiting on the porch when a man's step sounded on the wooden steps, and a little glad cry told Laura that "ma husband" had come at last. She thought he seemed rather quiet, and felt vexed with him for not playing up to the loving welcome better, and hoped he would not find fault with the supper.

Then she dished up the T-bone steak, which really looked and smelt rather good, and took it to set it on the dining-table in the tiny room off the drawing-room. Now Laura would not have been human if she had refrained from peeping at the pretty little domestic scene of happy reunion. There was a pink shade to the

electric light, and the little white-clad wife was curled up on the rug at the man's feet, her pretty, pale face turned up lovingly to her young husband's. He was lighting a cigarette, and her white, slender fingers held the match for him.

"Are you glad now you ran away with Girlie?" she said in babyish tones.

The T-bone steak slid from the dish, and tobogganed across the clean cloth, bowling over a glass of carnations that stood in the middle. The young husband had turned his face so that Laura saw it in the full light. And he was Alan Fayce!

Laura did not know what she did, or how she got out of the door, out into the street, away, away, as quick as her trembling legs would carry her from the dreadful reality that felt so like a bad dream of the night. She had run out just as she was, with neither coat nor hat, the little apron still tied round her waist and the stiff cap on her head. She tore them off and flung them from her as she ran. She did not even know where she was going. She only knew that she must get away somewhere, anywhere, where he could not see or speak to her.

It would be futile to claim that Laura was behaving in a strong-minded or sensible manner; but then she had received a severe shock on the top of two Canadian washings that day. She ran for her life until she came to the outskirts of the town, although there was no need to run at all, as, like the wicked, she fled when no man pursued. When she was clear of the little houses and green boulevards and cement walks, and saw nothing before her but the dun dusk prairie stretching silent and calm, she flung herself down in

the short, sweet-smelling herbage, and wished that it was winter and the snow would come and lap her gently round, and let her never, never wake again.

But it was not winter yet, though the Indian summer was now a thing of the past, and the short fall evenings were chilly, and all the little trees in the river-bottom showed nothing but bare white twigs against the bare cut-banks. There was no snow yet to make a melancholy and romantic finish to the story of poor Laura, as she sat on the prairie and buried her head in her hands, and cried her heart out because she could think of nothing better to do.

It shows that she was not one of those practical, common-sense girls that all the little books commend to the Dominion of Canada, or she would never have wasted her time crying when night was coming on, and she had no lodging to go to, and her box was still standing on one corner at the bottom of Mrs. Spender's backyard.

If Laura had been a Canadian girl she would have got a hustle on at once; but that would positively have been rather a pity, as in that case there would have been nobody sitting crying in the grass by the side of the trail when a certain young Englishman came riding slowly by on a tired pony. It was getting dark, as we have seen, but it was not too dark to show the rider that the object in the grass was a girl, and a girl in trouble, and when we mention that the Englishman was no other than Gerald West, it is unnecessary to add that he was by her side in a jiffy, begging to be allowed to be of service to the fair unknown.

Then: "Laura! My dear, dear girl!" he exclaimed.



This was getting along rather fast, and he would not have been so indiscreet if he had not been in the first place rather sleepy, and in the second place a great deal excited at recognising Miss Grayson with the tears running down her pretty rosy cheeks in this unconventional place and manner.

"What *is* the matter? Don't, don't cry like that! It makes me feel so awfully bad," pleaded Gerald. "Tell me who has made you cry, dearest, and I'll smash his head for him! What is it, my dear one?"

But Miss Grayson only turned her head away and wept afresh, and said, "Oh no, oh no! I'll never, never tell you! I never want to see him any more!"

She also said that her heart was broken, but that it didn't matter, and would Gerald please leave her alone, as she wished to go on dying. She said this with a dreadful calm, but of course Gerald knew that was all nonsense. So he said, tenderly and encouragingly, "Look here! I'm not going to bother you at all. I know just how you feel about everything. I'm going to take you right to Aunt Mary. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Upon this Laura, who had thought herself at an end of her tears, discovered a fresh fount, and getting by degrees to be supported on Gerald's shoulder, sobbed, "Oh yes! Please, please take me to Aunt Mary. I'd like to go to her."

So home to Aunt Mary they went, and a very pretty group they made, no doubt: Gerald leading the pony, and Laura sitting sideways in the high-peaked saddle. The acute discomfort of the nobbly horn when ridden

in this manner has nothing to do with the appearance of the group, and it would certainly have spoiled the effect to Gerald's rather old-fashioned way of thinking if Laura had thrown a leg across and ridden Western fashion.

He kept her hand in his as they went ; but he was a very honourable young man, and he never once pressed it unnecessarily, for he had no reason to think that Mr. Fayce had withdrawn from the field. It was such a pretty group that Gerald was half wishing somebody would be looking out at Buffalo Cottage, and Laura was fervently hoping the direct opposite. There was only Captain Kingsway, smoking a cigar on the verandah, and Gerald began to take back his wish for an audience, as he lifted down his fair burden with scarlet ears.

"Where's Aunt Mary ?" shouted Gerald.

"What's the news ?" demanded the Captain, who thought in the half-light that Gerald was letting down a sack of meal.

"None at all," said Gerald, remembering his errand with a start.

"You're a bright scout !" snapped the Captain. "Why don't you take that meal round to the barn ?"

"Aunt Mary, I've brought you something !" called Gerald. And then Aunt Mary and the girls all came running to fuss over poor Laura, and Kingsway said, "Bless my soul !" and bolted into the house.

Laura found her voice after a while, and with her head on Aunt Mary's knee she told all her adventures, with the exception of the last one, which she had

determined not to breathe to a living soul. The recital proved so engrossing that the weary men of the establishment sighed heavily, and uncrossed their legs, and went into the kitchen to get the supper ready themselves. The Captain was cross and miserable. Gerald reported that there was no one in Crane's shack, and the nearest neighbour, two miles off, had seen nothing of him for weeks. "So I came back," reported Gerald. "I didn't know what else to do."

Gerald had failed in his mission, and he had no reason, as far as Kingsway could see, to whistle and sing as he made the buttered toast.

Alberta was disposed to resent his cheerfulness, and asked scornfully if he had not done several obvious things. As, why had he not camped out on the doorstep till Jake returned? Or why had he not pinned a note to the door demanding an explanation? Or why had he not broken into the shack and searched it for a clue? Men were so stupid and faint-hearted, said the intrepid Alberta.

In Gerald's opinion Laura did not do justice to the toast and other dainties; and yet she did not do so badly for a girl who had been prepared to die half an hour ago, and she looked bright-eyed and rosy, and quite able to appreciate the comfortable sensation of being a tired and unhappy person who has suddenly come to anchor in the midst of friends.

Gerald had just asked for a fifth cup of tea, and the Captain had taken the teapot to the kettle and found it had boiled dry, when the telephone bell rang so suddenly that Aunt Mary upset the milk-jug.

The Captain got to the 'phone first, taking a mean advantage of sitting next the door, and everybody else listened with bated breath.

"Yes. . . . That's me. What? Is that so? Dear, dear, that's bad. . . . What? . . . Typhoid? Delirious? H'm. Yes, yes, I'll come up at once. Thanks! Thanks!"

It is dreadful to be able to hear only one side of an important conversation.

"Poor chap's down with typhoid," said Kingsway, hanging up the receiver. "In the hospital here in Sunshine. Been in three weeks. Very bad, they say. . . . Robin! Who said anything about Robin? It's young Crane."

"Poor, poor boy!" Aunt Mary said gently.

"He'll be able to tell us something about Robin," Alberta said, "and if he had really done anything wrong, he would be more likely to tell when he's ill."

Sally had crept close to the Captain, and was pulling at his sleeve.

"What did they say? Tell me, please! Is he very bad? Is—oh, Captain, they didn't say poor Jake would die?"

She was very white, and her blue eyes were big and frightened. "Tell me just what they said," she implored.

"But I've told you," Kingsway said gently. "I'm going to the hospital now. You can come too, Sally, if you like."

There was an almost joyful ring in his voice, for that rather heartless speech of Alberta's had told him something he very much wanted to know. It is

never thus that a woman speaks of the man she loves.

And then, chivalrous soul, he took shame to himself for his joy. For poor Crane was sick, deadly sick, of typhoid fever, and all his love for Alberta was love lost.

## CHAPTER XX

“ PRETTY SICK ! ”

THE Salt Hospital was one of the biggest buildings in Sunshine. It was built of red brick, and stood across the end of a street that terminated in the steep coulee, with the dull, steady rush of the river sounding deep in its depths. It was one of the most prominent institutions you saw in a first stroll round the town, and it was more than likely that the newcomer would have further opportunity of studying it at close quarters from within before his sojourn in Sunshine was over.

It is pleasant to chronicle of Sunshine that it owned this large hospital building ; for a hospital may be taken for a sign of grace and evidence of humanity. But the sufferer who imagined that the hospital was in any sense a free or public institution invariably found out his mistake when he was sufficiently recovered to attend to financial matters. You went there, willy-nilly, when you were found to be suffering from typhoid, or a broken leg, or frost-bite when that winter sport was in season ; and you paid the bill, willy-nilly, when the doctors and nurses were through with you. Not all the patients discharged their indebtedness, inevitably ; some were dishonest enough

to die, inflicting substantial loss on the establishment, for which defection the survivors naturally had to pay a little more. It is one of the boasts of the proud young Dominion that she has no workhouse, casual ward, or infirmary for her sick poor. She needs none of these, says Canada, since she has no sick poor or helpless indigent.

She classifies her people differently. There is the "pen" for "vags," and any poor wretch who is too weak, or stupid, or unfortunate, or improvident to provide himself with the means of subsistence may be classed as a vagrant and sent down to the penitentiary out of the way of industrious citizens. As to the typhoid cases which were always floating in, the Management agreed to take them in and take their luck on them. There was often a chance of some relative turning up to foot the bill, especially in the case of Old Country patients.

The Salt Hospital owed its existence in the first place to an awkward Dominion statute which obliged the Salt Mining Company to provide accommodation for sick or injured employees. It was thus in its inception in no way an enterprise for public philanthropy; and when public duties were thrust on it by Mounted Police, private employers, and municipal authorities, and any other person or persons who found themselves saddled with the unwanted sick, it is scarcely fair to blame the hospital Board for making a good thing out of it, in common with the host of hungry doctors of various and doubtful qualifications who had pitched their tents in the city.

There were three nurses and a matron at the hospital, and they all had a fine scorn for the medical men who

fondly imagined they presided over the patients. It was perhaps a good thing for the patients that they did act very much on the dictates of their own common sense, as it was quite usual for the doctor who was supposed to be attending a case to forget to visit it for more than a week.

"But land sake alive!" said the stalwart nurse from London (Ont.), "what can the doctors teach *us* about typhoid? We've been nursing nothing else for more than a year, and that's more than any of them can say."

There had been trouble in the typhoid ward that day, and the fiery little doctor who had been absent on what he termed a "jamboree" for the best part of a week, had come back and was "getting after" the staff because the case which had been doing so well had had an unaccountable relapse. The doctor blamed the night-nurse, and the night-nurse put it on the day-nurse, who was her junior, and both united in suspecting the new ward-maid, who was known to be English and very soft-hearted, of having smuggled food to the patient, who was in the ravenously hungry stage of typhoid.

It was a serious matter. It was less important in the case of another man, because he was "pretty well fixed," and had told them that his father in Scotland would see that the fees were paid, even if he pegged out. It was safe to keep that patient another five weeks, if necessary. But the English boy was an apple off quite another tree. He was as obstinate and silent after a month in hospital as on the day they brought him in, and no questioning or cajolery or artful conversation had served to extract a clue



to his name or the whereabouts of his people. For of course the nurses had not been looking after fever patients for all those years without knowing enough to be able to spot the kind of young man who has "people." This one refused to tell anything about the people, but there was always a likelihood of the people turning up to look for him. The matron had been through the young man's pockets for a clue without finding one, but when the relapse occurred she went through them again, and discovered a pocket which she missed before, with an unposted letter to the patient's mother in England, as they supposed, which gave all they wanted to know. And on the information being divulged came the disquieting news that, instead of being wanted by wealthy relatives in England, the unknown patient was wanted by the police. This made the little freckled ward-maid very sad, for the nurse from London (Ont.), who was wise in the ways of the world, said it was very likely the best thing for him if he was going to have a spell in the pen, as that would give him a better chance of regaining his strength than if he were turned out to look for work, late in the fall as it was, on the very edge of winter, when work was bad to get, even for the sound and healthy. He would sure be up against it when he went out. Ten dollars a week for hospital fees and the doctor's bill to boot would ensure that.

It was the saddest place, this hospital in Sunshine; and the saddest people in it seemed to be the ones who were getting better and looking forward with melancholy anticipation to the prospect of trying to start again, weak and strange and without money, in a land where there is no pity for the weak or kindness

for the stranger. And it was sadder still to think that most of these sad-eyed, anxious patients were the cheery, hopeful ones who had come out full of good resolutions and bubbling over with energy and industry to win some of the good things of life out of the Land of Promise. It had proved a Land of Broken Promise to those that had fallen by the way; and there were plenty of strong and lusty ones to step over them and snatch the scant favours from Canada's grudging hand.

Things always look their blackest to a sick man, especially when he is very much alone, with an imbecile Galician on one side of him, and a fellow on the other much too ill to talk to.

The Englishman who wouldn't tell his name lay quite still, staring down an infinite length of grey calico quilt at the mound made by his own toes, and repenting bitterly the indiscreet meal that was a secret between himself and the ward-maid with the freckles. This it was that had sent him back to his present state of sick and far-away weakness from that of approaching convalescence and ravening hunger.

He heard faintly, in an uninterested way, the electric-bell buzzing away in another ward, and later the high heels of the day-nurse click-clacketing along the polished corridor.

There was a big voice hushed very carefully, as people do hush big voices in hospitals, and the nurse's voice not hushed at all, saying that somebody was "prurly sick" and not to be excited.

Then the heels came click-clacketing nearer, and after them big tip-toe feet taking long strides, and light, quick steps after these. And if the nameless

one had not been so rottenly weak, he might have been interested enough to raise himself on his elbow to look who was going to have a visitor.

"He's prurry sick," repeated the nurse.

The big voice, quite forgetting to be hushed, said, "Bless my soul! It's Robin! It's Robin!"

Half a second later, two warm hands enclosed the thin face of the obstinate Englishman, and Sally was raining tears and kisses impartially upon a patient who was on no account to be excited.

And Robin was looking past Sally's face at the Captain standing behind her, and saying, in a tearful, weak voice, "Don't go and tell! Don't tell Aunt Mary, Captain! I—didn't—mean anyone—to know——"

"Poor kid!" muttered the Captain. He turned away, and made great play of blowing his nose. "Sally, dry up the water-works! You'll do yourself harm if you let yourself go like this. Poor old chap!"

"Wal, I guess he *is* prurry sick," repeated the nurse.

Needless to say, the patient became excited at once. You could almost see his temperature going up by leaps and bounds, and he got a thermometer in his mouth that stopped him from talking any more for a bit.

"And—where's Jake?" Sally said.

"Yes, by Jove. You've got Crane here?" Kingsway looked round the ward.

"What? Isn't that Crane you've got there? Now! Kin you beat that?" exclaimed the nurse.

Here the patient was heard to mumble desperately that he couldn't talk with that beastly thing in his

mouth, and then the thermometer fell out and rolled under the bed and got broken, which made the nurse so cross that she whiffled both the visitors right out of the room. But she talked to them in the passage, and even relented so far as to let Sally go back and sit by her brother, on condition that neither of them spoke a word.

"If that's not Crane, I don't know," said the nurse. "Matron found a letter in his pocket he'd forgotten to mail, to his mother in England. His name was Crane there, it cert'nly was. But we never told him we found it. He was so set on keeping his name dark."

Kingsway said, "Poor kid!" again. Then the nurse heard Sally and the patient positively both talking at once, and hastily ordered Sally out of the ward and Robin to go to sleep. It was really high time the ward settled down for the night, and the Captain hurried Sally off home to tell the others the glad news.

It was such joyful news that it was a shame to spoil it by telling it on the 'phone, he said. When they were within a hundred yards of the house, Sally tried to take an unfair advantage by breaking away and making a bolt to get in first, and the Captain wasn't going to stand that, so he put a sprint on and won by a head, and they burst in together, shouting the news in the porch both at once, and making such a noise that it was impossible to tell what it was all about.

They were all so happy because the lost one was found that at first they forgot how very ill poor Robin was; and then when Sally told how she didn't know him until she saw the white scar on his cheek that he got at football last season, and how white and thin

he was, and old looking and tired, Aunt Mary began to cry and couldn't stop, though Alberta held her close in her arms, and dried her eyes ever so gently.

They were very happy that night in Buffalo Cottage, despite all the tears that were flowing. Aunt Mary wished to remove Robin at once from the hospital, so that she could nurse him herself, and be sure he didn't get any solid food, or smoke any of those dreadful cigarettes he was so fond of. It required a lot of argument to persuade her that it would be better to let him stay where he was for the present.

“ When he gets about again, we shall have to find him a nice little billet in the Company, eh, Captain ? ” suggested Gerald generously ; and Kingsway was feeling so pleased and relieved that he forbore from snubbing the last and smallest shareholder.

Alberta was indignant at the idea of putting the invalid in harness again, and asked Gerald how he would like it himself.

“ It's all through me,” she said. She had said this before, and one may conclude that she said it again for the pleasure of being contradicted. “ If it hadn't been for me egging him on to take any work, however humble, rather than be idle, like it says in the pamphlets, he would never have gone to work on that farm, and got typhoid with the bad water.”

“ And if he had stopped safe at home in dear old Craven Bridge——” began Betty. Kingsway took her up short, answering Alberta at the same time.

“ If Robin had never left England, I doubt if he would ever have worked at all at anything. I always did say it was a sin and a shame and putting temptation in the way of the Evil One to bring young people up to

think life nothing but a bed of roses. And typhoid and all, I'm bound to say it's done you all a heap of good. Yes, all of you. You've every one improved, and got rid of some of your nonsense, even Gerald."

Sally broke a rather awkward silence that followed this plain speaking; for while fully agreeing in respect of what was said about the others, each felt it distinctly unfair to be included in so sweeping a statement.

"I haven't done any work," said Sally reluctantly. "I've been a real waster. I never earned a cent."

Kingsway looked at her.

"You're improved, all the same," he said, and wondered privately what it could be that had brought out the latent womanliness in tomboy Sally. That young lady herself innocently supplied the answer.

"If only we knew where Jake is," she said with a fine blush, "then we could be perfectly happy. It's more mysterious than ever about him, for you know, he couldn't possibly think he had anything to do with Robin getting the fever."

Betty suggested that perhaps Jake had robbed her brother while delirious, and then repented; and if there had not been such a spirit of thankfulness abroad, it is likely that Sally and she would have been two persons for at least an hour.

Kingsway declined the offer of a shakedown on the sofa, and went back to his hotel in the small hours.

He was still wondering how the land lay. He was exercised in his mind a good deal about Jake Crane, and wishing he could get hold of that elusive person. For the Captain, being a punctilious, honourable man, could not get it out of his mind that he owed his life all these good years to that callow English boy who

had been fighting Canada and trying to make good against heavy odds out in the wilds ever since their first acquaintance. As he had never repaid that signal service, it did not look like cricket to him to steal a march on Jake when he was out of the way.

"I'll find the chap up and start fair," Kingsway planned, and he added a prayer that the absent Jake would come back with no more deeds of heroism to his credit.

Of course, quite early, next morning, the hospital gate was besieged by everybody from Buffalo Cottage except Laura, who was very happy doing the "chores" and getting dinner ready. It was suggested that Sally should stay at home too, but Sally flatly refused. She had quite forgotten to ask Robin about the Poor Cat. That Poor, Forgotten Cat! Now that the prime cause of anxiety was removed, she was able to shed long-deferred tears on its account, and to conjure up pictures of it, forgotten and alone, lost on the prairie.

"But, of course, I shall not say anything," she said. "Robin is too ill to have anything said to him, and the nurses may be taking care of the Meritorious One at the hospital."

The nurse from London, Ont., knew how to play the martinet. Visiting hours were from two to four; and to-day was Flower Friday, when the wards would be cleared at "half after three."

So our impatient family were constrained to walk about until noon, when they fortunately met Kingsway on his way to his lunch, and he promptly took them under his protection, and made them eat a proper meal and sit down and be sensible. When it was two

o'clock, Aunt Mary and Gerald went, as a first instalment, because the Captain said only two would be let in at a time, and the nurses were more civil to a man.

Sally and Betty went to a hardware store to try to buy a feeding-cup and a hot-water bottle for Robin when he came home, and Alberta waited with the Captain in the hotel.

"I wish to goodness I could find that boy Crane," Kingsway said.

He was watching Alberta carefully, with a furrow between his brows.

"He'll come back," said Alberta confidently. "He—he promised, at least he sort of promised himself to see—us—again—soon. I think he—he liked coming to see us. He's been so lonely, poor fellow, and I think he'd lost heart, and making friends with us seemed to—sort of—put new life into him. There! You're looking cynical, but I can't help it. It's true. He told me so. I don't see why not, either!"

Kingsway sighed and said, "I thought so!" which may have meant anything, and the girls broke an awkward interval by coming back with an enamel feeding-cup, which was the only kind to be had. Alberta said it wouldn't do; and Kingsway looked glum, and said when he had enteric in South Africa nobody fed him with a feeder, and he had to take the route again when he was as bad as Robin was now.

In the meantime, Aunt Mary had been admitted, and was standing over a boy her tear-dimmed eyes could scarcely see at all.

"Aunt Mary, I—I'm so poorly!"

Now that they had come and found him, and everybody was kind, and sorry for him, Robin was beginning



to be sorry for himself too. His eyes welled over for very weakness, just because Aunt Mary was crying, and he held on to her slender, white hand, as if it was a stout rope that was going to haul him back from those strange regions where he had been straying for the last few weeks of sickness and suffering.

"I have been so miserable, Aunt Mary. I didn't feel as if I was ever going to see any of you again."

She was stroking the rough, scarred, wasted fingers with her delicate hands, and could not say a word for the pity and thankfulness that were choking her speech.

It was not her big, stalwart, footballing nephew who was lying there, six feet of helplessness, and his cheery voice sunk to a whisper. It was not the Robin of those days that Aunt Mary was crying over, and thanking God in her heart that He had given him back to her to cry over; but a shrimp of a boy, away back in the years, laid up in the school sanatorium, with some childish ailment, and sobbing his heart out because Aunt Mary had come to tell him that his dear mother was dead and he would never see her any more.

In that dark day of bereavement for those five boys and girls, orphaned of both parents within a year, Aunt Mary had opened her spinster's heart and home, and found room in both for the whole tribe; but the first place always remained Robin's from that day to the end.

"It was very, very wrong not to tell us where you were," she scolded gently. "We have been so unhappy and anxious!"

"I'm sorry. But I couldn't—not when everybody knew. And he told, didn't he? Old Kingsway—at

the Fair. And I couldn't show up after it—and with no money—looking such an ass. I never got my wages, Aunt Mary. And I worked so hard. It was with dabbling my hands in water such a lot at Fayce's that they cut up so. They used to be hard enough for anything when I was playing cricket. And—it was only one day I was spieling, Aunt Mary !”

Aunt Mary called him a dear brave boy, and begged him to lie still and not talk. But he would talk ; he had had nobody to talk to for so long.

“ You know, after I saw Kingsway, I bolted. I was just down and out. I felt beastly rotten too. And I'd got no money—only my pony that Skelton gave me for my pay—I think the doctor has swiped him. It costs such a lot, Aunt, just lying here starving. It does seem hard, for you can't be earning anything when you're ill. I got work in that construction camp beyond the racecourse where they were scraping pimples off the prairie ; and then the second day they brought me here. I suppose—I didn't want to turn up again broke. I thought if I got better, I'd make good, and show them, Kingsway and the rest, whether I was a rotter. And then I heard them talking—the matron and the doctor—about making my people pay for me if I pegged out—and I wasn't going to have any of that—so I wouldn't tell where I came from, or anything. Oh dear ! I'm so hungry, Aunt Mary !”

When she got to telling him all about the new house, and his bed that had been waiting ready for him all these weeks, and how the girls had cried whenever there was anything extra nice for supper, for thinking how Robin would have enjoyed it, the patient declared he was quite strong enough to leave the hospital right

away, and tried to shout for his clothes to be brought, but his voice faded away into an absurd whisper.

"You must be quiet. They'll turn me out if you are not good," Aunt Mary warned him. She was in great awe of the tall nurse.

But nurses are not all adamant, and the massive person from London (Ont.) came and rebuked the patient, and gave him his medicine, but allowed the little old lady in black to stay on by his side.

She guessed that Robin couldn't move out for another two weeks, though Robin begged like a cripple at a stake.

"I should get better such a lot quicker if I were at home," he pleaded. "It's so different when it's your own people, and that big nurse has hands like a pitchfork. The little freckled one that scrubs the floors is a good little thing. She's been awfully nice to me. Oh, do, do take me away, Aunt Mary! They'll make me pay ten dollars for every week I'm here; as well as the doctor; and they say I've spent the poor pony long ago."

"I shall speak to the doctor," said Aunt Mary. "I will take up a determined attitude."

"That would be no good at all," argued Robin. He was getting a little stronger, evidently. "The Captain—he would fix the doctor. He's very—forcible, isn't he?"

When Robin's eyes closed for weariness, Aunt Mary sat on by his side.

Alberta and Betty had been promised that they should go in and see their brother, but they had peeped through the folding door, and stole away again, loth to disturb the triumphant tenderness and

care that beamed upon her boy through Aunt Mary's spectacles.

Rules and regulations are not to be disregarded, however ; it became necessary to request Aunt Mary to go when " half after three " arrived, and it was time for the Flower Guild to make their weekly hospital visit. They swept through the ante-room, where several visitors were waiting to see relatives and friends, a galaxy of bright beauty, throwing off furs, for the day was sharp, and revealing pink and yellow and purple evening-gowns, powdered necks, and bare, bony, ungloved arms. Alberta knew most of the charitably disposed ladies by name from her connection with the *Booster* ; but more people know Jack than Jack knows. They did not so much as look at the plain folk with everyday attire and anxious faces.

Their mission was to take a gleam of brightness and a whiff of patchouli into the place of pain and weariness, and the procession sailed on in a magnificent flutter, each carrying the flowers that had done duty at the last At Home, as a graceful offering.

I think Aunt Mary was in a state bordering on a nap. Her eyes were open, looking at Robin as he slept, but her wits were wandering, and the big nurse had to shake her twice before she looked up.

" You'll have to clear. The Flower Guild is coming, and the lady needs that chair," she said.

A magnificent form towered over Aunt Mary. It was the great Mrs. Royal herself, with three carnations and six inches of smilax in her hand, and a bunch of ospreys pinned in her hair with a diamond buckle.

" The lady wants that chair," repeated the nurse, and tilted the chair to make her meaning plain.

Aunt Mary sprang up.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she began, all in a flutter.

Mrs. Royal rustled into the chair, with snaky, undulating movements.

"Visitors hev to clear right now. You've had an hour and a half," said the nurse firmly; and Aunt Mary bowed her head and went out meekly.

The thin hand on the grey quilt twitched, missing the cool fingers that had been withdrawn; and the slimy dampness of flower-stalks four days in water took its place. He awoke with a start, and the smile of sleep broke into a look of consternation. The patient who had declared himself well enough to leave the hospital broke into a fit of childish weeping.

"It's all a dream!" he wailed. "I thought it was Aunt Mary, and it was nothing but a dream. Nurse! Nurse! Take her away! Take—this beastly—woman—away from me!"

"We never found out about the Meritorious One," Sally said, as they went home a small feminine army, leaving the men of the party to tackle the doctor with a view to getting their invalid into their own hands. "And Aunt Mary would never remember to ask about Jake, would you?"

Aunt Mary had asked none of the really important things, it appeared, but she looked so blissful that nobody had the heart to scold her for forgetting. And they would have Robin home soon, and then they would hear everything they wanted to know.

Aunt Mary shivered a little in her light wrap as they walked home.

"If only there was a fireplace," she said. "The

dreadful winter is going to begin, and however are we to keep that poor boy warm ? ”

“ You forget that the house will be warmed,” Alberta reminded her. “ It is rather soon to start the furnace, because it is only the end of October, and the winter, what bit of it we get here, never sets in until December. But, as you say, it certainly is rather cold, and with an invalid in the house we shall have to keep it rather extra warm. We must buy a thermometer, so as to be able to regulate the heat. So many Canadians make the mistake of having their houses too close. A room should never be over fifty-six degrees Fahrenheit, or else that’s the correct rate for the pulse when it’s normal. But, at any rate, we mustn’t get into the way of having the house too hot. Gerald shall start the furnace to-night.”

“ I shall be very thankful,” said Aunt Mary, “ for really I think it is nearly as cold as England. It would be so very nice if I could put my feet on the fender, and have a real good warm.”

“ Poor Auntie ! You won’t feel like that when we get the furnace going. You’ve no idea how snug it will be. You’ll never want to see an open fire again. No draughts either. An Old Country fire would be absolutely futile in this country. At least, it would be in the other parts where the winter is severe.”

It was not so cold in the house, however, because Laura had kept a good fire up in the kitchen stove, and had a nice hot meal ready. This considerably warmed and cheered the hungry party. Aunt Mary’s spirits rose again, but she dared not tell Alberta that,

at Laura's instigation, she had had an enjoyable five minutes on a chair in front of the stove, while Laura was dishing the supper.

It was a very good supper, and showed progress on the part of a girl who had been such a dismal failure at a Canadian breakfast.

But Gerald and the Captain did not turn up to enjoy it, somewhat it is to be feared to the disappointment of the cook. It is not to be imagined that these persons of importance could devote their whole attention to domestic affairs; while the ladies were engaged in hanging round the hospital, all kinds of revolutionary undertakings in the wheat-markets of the West had been occupying Kingsway and the no less enthusiastic Gerald. Half-way through supper, in came—perhaps swaggered is the best word—Gerald, vastly important, and riding Robin's pony, which Kingsway had redeemed from the clutches of the hospital doctor.

"Pack my grip, quick, Alberta," he shouted. "Anything you can think of, only be quick. Come, get a hustle on. We've got to go to the Hat again. I've only just time for the train. Yes, my pyjamas and brushes and things. You know. It's some difficulty about the site for the elevator at Bow Island."

"But what are you going for?" asked Alberta.

"Oh, some technical matters. Old Kingsway can't do without me. I've no time to go into details now." Gerald had the grace to blush. He had earnestly begged the Captain to let him accompany him, for he had left Medicine Hat in haste on the last visit, and was anxious to finish his private investigations for Mr. Fayce.

"We've arranged about Robin. Kingsway had an awful row with the doctor. This is Robin's pony. He's pretty decent. You'd better put him somewhere, Sally. I've not time to fix him myself."

"I suppose he ought to go in the stable," said Aunt Mary.

"But there isn't a stable," objected Sally.

"There was a two-stalled stable in my original plan, you remember," said Gerald stiffly.

"But you can't keep a pony in a plan," snapped Sally. "We shall have to stand him in the hen-place if he isn't too tall."

"Do be quick with that grip, Alberta."

There was really no ostensible reason why Gerald should not have packed his portmanteau himself; but he wanted to get a word or two with Laura alone. Betty and Sally went out to see to the pony, and Aunt Mary went upstairs to help to pack the said "grip."

"I haven't forgotten," said Gerald, looking as haggard as he could. "I won't come back till I've found him this time."

Laura looked rather uncomfortable.

"I don't want you to find him," she said. "What do you want him so badly for?"

"Didn't I promise?" cried Gerald excitedly. "Didn't I give you my word that I'd search for the fellow till he was found? Do you think I'm the sort of a fellow to break a promise—and a promise made to you—Laura?" he added, in a low voice.

"No. No, I'm sure you wouldn't. It's really awfully good of you——"

"Not at all. In fact, it's going dead against my



better judgment. But a promise is a promise. He may be only feeling shy, or stoney-broke, or something quite excusable. I got a clue of him at the Hat last week, and then I had to come back without following it up. But I won't come back till I get him this time."

"It won't do any harm to look for him at Medicine Hat," said Laura absently. "I mean, thank you so much! You've barely twenty minutes to get to the station."

"The depot," corrected Gerald, snatching the grip. "Oh, I say, who wants all this truck? That's Aunt Mary's doing, I'll bet anything. Bed-socks! Comforter! Sweater! Bless the women, I'm not going to the North Pole."

He looked long and regretfully at Laura, kissed everybody else, and fled forth with the grip lighter by a litter of garments spread over the floor.

"Gerald is such a business-like young man," Aunt Mary said. "His Uncle Richard was just the same, and it was most difficult to persuade him to take even a spare pocket-handkerchief."

"And now we shall have to do the furnace ourselves," remarked Alberta complacently. Aunt Mary looked alarmed.

"It is certain to explode," she said. "And how can we possibly fill up that great dreadful thing?"

"Why, it's as simple as possible," cried Alberta. "Gerald has explained it to me several times. You just make a fire in the inside somewhere, and the hot air comes puffing in through all the gratings into the rooms. You only have to attend to it once in twelve hours. Pack it up with a bit of slack when you go

to bed, take out the ash-pan in the morning, and there you are. Of course, it will be up to Gerald when he is at home."

She went down the cat-ladder into the basement, and set about the unknown monster with a pleasurable sense of novelty. Aunt Mary and Laura sat by the grating in the sitting-room, and waited for the puffs of hot air to come up to them. They could hear Alberta downstairs, crumpling papers, and striking matches, chopping sticks, and breaking pieces of coal, and then the closing of the furnace door.

Aunt Mary drew her chair back cautiously.

"If only we had the slightest idea which direction the explosion would take!" she said nervously.

Alberta came up and put her hand across the grating.

"I think I can feel it beginning to breathe," she said. "Perhaps you oughtn't to be sitting so close, because of stopping the draught."

"But I thought there were no draughts in Canada," faltered Aunt Mary, obediently drawing back her chair.

"Not that kind," Alberta said shortly. "That's only the chips crackling. It can't possibly go off, I tell you."

"It seems so shortsighted not to have had the house insured," murmured Aunt Mary. "Isn't it smoking?"

"No. That's the great advantage of these furnaces," said Alberta. "They can't possibly smoke."

She took up a book. Aunt Mary tried to sew. Laura went out to help the girls, who were trying to erect a lean-to, with a curtain-pole and a piece of sacking, to stable the pony in.

After ten minutes of strenuous self-control, Aunt Mary sneezed, looked apologetic, and then sneezed again.

"You will not be advised and wear your long-sleeved bodices, Aunt Mary," said Alberta reproachfully. "Now you are taking cold."

"It's the smoke," Aunt Mary said, and sneezed again.

"It's only natural for it to smoke a bit at first," Alberta admitted, "but I wish it would begin to breathe."

She went downstairs to poke it up. The basement was full of smoke, and it took her some time to grope her way to the furnace. When she opened the stove-door, she saw that the fire was burning merrily away inside, but a further volume of smoke belched forth, and she was obliged to shut it in a hurry.

"It's burning splendidly," she announced, "but there's rather a lot of smoke down there, and of course it will work up naturally through the floor. We had better open the windows. And the door too. Sit round out of the draught, Aunt Mary. The house will soon be as warm as toast."

"It isn't breathing a bit," announced Sally. "Hadn't we better put the beastly thing out? We could go to bed, and we should soon get warm there."

"We can't put it out," said Alberta. "There's a huge red-hot fire, and we have no tongs. And when you open it, it puffs smoke and flames in your face."

"Oh, don't go near it!" said Aunt Mary. "It will go out when it explodes. How I wish the house was insured."

"We might be carrying out the most valuable pieces of furniture, like the kitchen cabinet and the wicker chairs and the carpets," suggested Betty, "and the beds might be saved, if we began now."

Alberta wrapped up the bird in a cloth, and placed it on the verandah, but that, she explained, was simply because the smoke was bad for it, and not at all because she was expecting an explosion. Then she went down and pulled several little knobs and shut a mysterious little door, but without any result beyond an increased volume of smoke. After about an hour more, Sally said she was going to bed.

"I think it's the best thing we can do," agreed Alberta. "The smoke is less thick upstairs, and we can open the windows, and put our heads under the clothes. It will all have cleared up by morning."

They went dejectedly to bed, with the new hot-water bottle for Aunt Mary's feet. Nobody went to sleep. Alberta, panting for breath, heard stealthy footsteps going downstairs about twelve o'clock, and a little later the indicator of the telephone clicked as it worked round. She raised herself on her elbow to listen.

Aunt Mary's voice came next. Aunt Mary using the telephone, a thing neither wild horses nor determined nieces had hitherto been able to educate her to.

"Hello!" Aunt Mary enunciated, with obvious reluctance to use a slang expression. "Is that the fire engine? I mean the man who drives the fire engine. Will you please come quick and put the fire out?" A pause. "I don't know. It's somewhere

on the prairie. Buffalo Cottage. B-U-F-F—Number—I don't know. Oh, it says four thousand and three on the thing. You are really most kind, and I should apologise for troubling you when you must have been in bed, but the smoke is so disa—t'choo! t'choo!"

"What *have* you done, Aunt Mary?" cried the astounded Alberta, taking the receiver from her and hanging it up. "Now we shall have to appear in the Court for calling out the brigade for nothing. Get dressed, everybody. Aunt Mary has called up the fire brigade, and we shall look so silly explaining in our dressing-gowns. They will think it is a practical joke."

"It appears to me a much better joke than being burnt to death in our beds," said Aunt Mary, with unnatural calm. "And if we had no house left, what should we do with Robin?"

It was no use to tell the fire engine not to come, as they would have started out by now, so they dressed hurriedly and waited for the wrath to come. Alberta was expecting the whole brigade, with engine, fire-escape, brass helmets, and all; but the actual thing was less imposing. Two men in fur caps had driven out in a buggy to see what was wrong. They had guessed that it wasn't much of a fire, because there was no blaze; and they laughed a good deal, and obligingly carried Alberta's blazing fire out of doors, and quenched it on the prairie with a patent extinguisher.

"But what can be the matter with the horrible thing?" puzzled Alberta.

The fireman's eye twinkled.

"Wall, miss, I guess it'd be as well if you had a plumber come an' fix that furnace for you. They're

very apt to smoke if the pipe isn't connected up with the chimney. I reckon I'd get it done right now," he added. "We're in for a real cold snap, and you'll want it pretty bad."

"Oh, well, we can't learn without experience," commented Alberta, as they shut the windows and went shivering to bed.

Everybody slept the sleep of the just after that, but when they woke in the morning, getting up was a horribly chilly ordeal, and they breakfasted in their top-coats around the kitchen stove.

The cold snap had set in.

It was bitterly cold; there was no denying it, though all the little books, and a good many people who ought to have known better, had insisted that you didn't feel the cold in Canada, especially in Southern Alberta, on account of the altitude.

"I almost think," said Aunt Mary patiently, "I prefer the kind of cold one *can* feel!"

"But it will be quite a different thing when the house is warmed," comforted Alberta the optimist. "And I'm sure it must be quite exceptional for the winter to set in so early as this."

In response to frenzied appeals on the telephone, a plumber made his appearance towards tea-time, and connected up the flue-pipe in less than ten minutes. He was a very obliging man, and made a nice fire to let them see how nicely it drew; and gave a much-needed lesson on the uses of the puzzling little knobs and doors.

Scarcely had the door closed on his back, when a ringing cheer went up from the anxious party grouped about the parlour grating.

"Hurrah! It's breathing! It's breathing!!"

No exponent of Dr. Silvester's method ever cheered the success of his efforts with greater joy than did that frigid family when they felt the warm air stealing gently and steadily into the icy room.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THANKSGIVING

"THE Poor Meritorious One!"

It was Alberta who spoke, and her eyes brimmed over with sympathy. They had got Robin back at last, and he was doing splendidly, and going to have his first solid meal on Thanksgiving Day. The cold snap was still holding on, but the furnace was behaving beautifully, and the little house was as snug as possible when they brought the wanderer home. Robin had objected strenuously to being kept in bed, and the whole family kept him company upstairs so that he wouldn't fret.

Robin felt better for having got the sorrowful story off his mind.

"He might not die, you know," he suggested. "Some homesteader might adopt him. Or he might pal on with a wild cat. I dare say there are lots of little mice and gophers he could catch."

"I think it's so wrong of everybody," complained Alberta. "They all treat us as if we were babies. If Jake had never told us all that nonsense about the kind woman at that horrible farm where poor Robin was, we should never have dreamt of sending the Poor Meritorious One to him. And I'd never have trusted



him to a wild creature like Jake for an instant, if I hadn't thought he would give him straight to Robin. Men haven't the first idea how to treat a cat."

Sally said not a word. Her head bent lower and lower over the sewing she was pretending to do, and her shoulders began to heave and heave, until she laid her arms on the table and hid her face and wept aloud.

Robin said weakly, "Poor old Sally! It's an awful shame. I knew you'd be cut up. But Jake was every bit as sorry as you are."

"You ought not to let yourself go like this, Sally," reproved Alberta. "It's so bad for Robin."

"I won't. I'll be all right in a minute," Sally said. She ran out of the room.

Alberta followed her a little later to her favourite place of meditation. She had clambered down into the basement and was cruddled up on a soap-box drawn in front of the furnace. You could see a glow of fire through the vent-hole in the door, and it was comforting when you were unhappy to watch the flames dancing through the tiny peephole. Sometimes the furnace would back-fire, and send out a thin flame that had singed Sally's front-hair a time or two, but she still clung to her refuge as the one place where she was safe from interruption.

"It's no good crying, Sally. Do come upstairs and be sensible," begged Alberta. "Robin's awfully sorry, and he's going to get you a kitten instead. And it was all an accident. You can't even blame that silly Jake much."

"But, oh!" sobbed Sally, "it isn't that. It isn't the Meritorious One at all! Can't you see? It's

poor Jake! And he was telling us that day on the telephone, and wanting us to say we'd forgive him. He was trying to tell us, and we thought it was Robin he was talking about. Poor Jake! He meant to be kind to us. And now, don't you see, he can't bear to come and see us, because of thinking we are angry. And we don't know where he is—and I shall never, never see him again—oh dear, oh dear!"

"Nonsense!" said Alberta firmly. "He's probably forgotten all about us by now."

"Oh no! No, he hasn't! You stupid girl, it's *you* he cares about! and he thinks you're vexed, and hard-hearted, and unforgiving. You *are* hard-hearted. You keep on saying the unkindest, slightingest things about him—and how can you?"

Alberta said, "Nonsense!" again, but not crossly. "The Captain will find him. He can't go and hide himself for ever because of having lost the cat. It's too absurd," she said. Sally shook her head.

"He knew that the Meritorious One was not a common cat," she argued. "And he promised to take care of him. He would feel it dreadfully if he had to own that he had broken a promise. Jake would, I mean."

"Well, don't stay down here. It's silly," said Alberta. She was half-way up the ladder when Sally called her back.

"Alberta, tell me! Don't you care for him a little bit?"

"Of course I do. But—the sweetest cat isn't the same as a person—and we don't even know if he is dead!"

"I meant Jake, of course."

"Don't!" said Alberta sharply. "It's not a fair question."

Sally's absurd question set Alberta thinking. As she cleaned the ice from the verandah with an axe, for she had swilled it to have it clean for Thanksgiving and it had made a first-class skating-rink instead, she tried to recall one day when she and Jake Crane had talked together on that bench in the ridiculous waste they called the park in Sunshine. Try as she would, she could not get the interview back complete, nor satisfy herself how much she had said, or how much she had left unsaid, before they parted. Had she really let him think she did care? If she did, she had done something very wrong. Ought she to have shown him beyond question that she didn't?

Things were very confusing in this Western country. It was hard to know what to do, and it was a good thing that there was plenty of work, of a plain, straightforward kind, such as dressing the Thanksgiving turkey, and making a plum-pudding and cranberry-sauce, and baking some cake that would not be too heavy for the invalid, and cleaning away the mess that the furnace had made on the nice newly calsomined walls the night it smoked.

For to-morrow was Thanksgiving Day, and the Canadian festival came home with good occasion to the English family.

Kingsway had telephoned that he and Gerald would be back at three in the afternoon, on the one available train. They would have got back sooner, their business being over, but that Gerald fancied he was on the track of Fayce, and was anxious to bring back definite tidings.

They expected to be quite a big party. Laura was still with them, although she kept talking about getting something to do, and had even gone the length of answering a dozen or so advertisements out of the "Help wanted—Female" column in the *Calgary Herald*.

All of the advertisers wrote back for her photograph, and Laura, thinking it must be the custom of the country, went to Sunshine to have it taken forthwith. The picture was very nice, and only cost two dollars for a dozen postcards. It showed her with her soft hair parted lightly under the little cloth cap she had made for herself when the cold weather put her straw hat out of business, and just a sign of that puzzled "What next?" look that sometimes becomes permanent in Canada's adopted children after they have "got stung."

Of course, Aunt Mary wouldn't hear of her leaving them before Thanksgiving. She had promised Gerald not to let her go, and besides her experience in wild-duck would be invaluable when there was a turkey to tackle. Sally had procured a particularly huge specimen from her friend the grave-digger, and Aunt Mary thought it looked, in its gory feathers, the most dreadful thing she had ever seen.

On Thanksgiving morning the Union Jack fluttered up to the top of the little staff at the corner of the verandah at Buffalo Cottage, and the first breath of the Chinook flapped it merrily. The cold snap had let up suddenly.

From thirty below—the state when you had to keep reminding yourself that your nose and ears were not frozen by rubbing them vigorously with your

mitts—it jumped in an hour to thirty-five above. They were ready for it, for was not the great arch stretched over the toothed ridge of the Rockies, opening up a blue vista of peaceful sky that suggested the Pacific waters beyond, the Chinook arch that Westerners watch for when cold seems too tense for humans to bear, and which even the silent, suffering beasts look for and hail in their dumb, patient relief.

Out of the calm, far blue, under the grey bow of cloud, the warm breath of the Chinook came like the presence of an unseasonable spring.

A piece of brown paper and an old black calico shirt flapped leisurely eastward across the prairie, with the first breath. Later, the Chinook came whooping and shouting, rattling the windows, blowing over the lean-to stable, banging the back-door open. An empty barrel bowled merrily across the house-front, and fetched up on the scraper; and clouds of dust, released from the frozen earth, tore homeless before the heavy gale, pattering and rattling on the window-panes. The thin scatter of snow seemed to rise into the air and be tossed and seen no more. The air tasted like a seidlitz powder, effervescent with tiny points of sharp moisture; and rising out of nowhere, little fluttering birds sprang up, flying blindly into the wind, as if in futile hope of reaching the calm blue beyond the storm and wind.

“This really *is* the beneficent Chinook,” said Aunt Mary. “It is quite nice, but I hope it will not blow the train off the rails and make them late for dinner.”

It was getting too warm to be comfortable in the little kitchen, where the turkey was beginning to sizzle, and the girls persuaded Aunt Mary to go and

lie down until the travellers came back. There was still quite a crowd, even without her, when all four girls were pottering about.

Sally had hung a little curtain over the cubby-hole that had been built in the wall for the Poor Cat, as it gave them all a pain to see his empty place and the little red cushion he would never sit on. And then she too said that the place was too full, and went upstairs to watch for the absent ones out of the top-window. A little later, she announced that a buggy was approaching, and Aunt Mary woke up out of the beginning of a nap to come and see who it was. There was only one man in the buggy, and he was neither Kingsway nor Gerald; when it came near enough to be seen plainly, Laura said, "Oh!" and ran away. But the stranger was quite close to the house before Alberta and Betty said in a breath, "Mr. Fayce!"

"How lovely!" exclaimed Alberta. "How beautifully it is all turning out! He has come to claim Laura after all."

Betty said that Laura had better open the door herself, so that they could have a joyous meeting at once, without any awkward preliminaries.

"You mustn't listen," said Alberta in reproof. "Come in and shut the door."

But they heard Mr. Fayce beating a tattoo with his knuckles on the door, there was no knocker, and still Laura did not answer the summons, but clattered pans in the kitchen as if to say, "If Mr. Fayce knocks tills he is black in the face, I shall not answer the door."

"I'd better go," said Alberta at length.

Mr. Fayce had the grace to blush as he shook hands.

"I've only just heard," he said nervously, "about

poor young Robin being up against it in the hospital. He's here, isn't he? I'd like to see him."

"Oh, *Robin*, is it?" Alberta said stupidly, and took him into the Den.

Robin was up and looking wonderfully better. He was, in fact, making Aunt Mary sit on his knee, and she was having a short second chapter of her nap, when Mr. Fayce came in and grasped him warmly by the hand.

"Say, old fellow, I was most awfully sorry about that cheque. I'd no idea you were really up against it. I've been looking for you all over the town. I'm in funds at last. I knew I should come out all right in the end. But I guess you blessed me some when they turned it down at the bank, eh? Fact is, I was in a pretty tight fix, and I didn't think I was going to make it right with Frite so easily."

"What cheque?" asked Robin. "I don't understand."

Aunt Mary began to look agitated.

"My nephew has to be kept very quiet, Mr. Fayce," she said in a warning whisper.

At the same time she pursed up her mouth and frowned quickly, putting the frown away when Robin turned his head. "Don't try to think about money now, Robin," she said soothingly.

Robin laughed till the tears came to his eyes.

"I see it! They turned down the cheque, and you never got the sixty dollars after all! Was that it, Aunt Mary? And you never told anybody. Oh, but you are a brick! She's such a brick, Fayce! And she's never done talking about how useful that money was. Telling all sorts of fibs to keep me from smelling a rat."

"One so often hears that murder will out," said Aunt Mary in confusion. "I do beg of you not to laugh. The exposure is very trying to me. It is only too true. I am afraid I deceived you all deliberately."

At this, Mr. Fayce and Robin both laughed so heartily that Aunt Mary prepared to be seriously angry. There is no telling how angry she might have been had not a commotion outside heralded the arrival of Kingsway and Gerald, the former in high spirits, the latter looking rather tragic.

"Where's Miss Grayson?" Gerald asked, drawing Alberta aside. He had missed her face at once from the welcoming group. Alberta knew that something was amiss with him when he said "Miss Grayson," for it had got to be "Laura" lately. "Where is she? I've got Fayce's address at last. He's come into some money, and back in Sunshine, and if she wants him I'll go and fetch him right now."

"I don't think she does want him really," said Alberta. "He's here, right now in the Den with Robin, and she won't come out of the kitchen to speak to him. We all thought she'd be tickled to death."

Gerald ran his fingers through his hair.

"Fayce here! Dash the fellow! What's to be done?"

"Perfectly simple," said Alberta. "We ask Mr. Fayce to stay dinner and put Laura to sit next him. They're bound to make it up then."

Kingsway elbowed Gerald out of the way rather unceremoniously.

"Oh, hang Fayce. Let him do his own courting,



if he wants," he said. " Alberta, you never said you were glad to see me back ! "

" But I am, awfully glad," said Alberta. " Now we're all here—everybody that ought to be here. Isn't it a complete Thanksgiving ? We feel so happy. Nobody's missing now ! "

Sally's face flushed, and she cast a long, reproachful look at Alberta's unclouded happiness.

Alberta saw it, and amended the sentiment.

" All but the Poor Meritorious One," she added penitently.

Sally turned away, her face all clouded and sad.

" I say," said Gerald in some excitement, " it will never do to have a scene at dinner. Where *is* the beast ? "

He plunged into the Den, where Aunt Mary was playfully telling Mr. Fayce, to whom she had suddenly taken a strong liking months ago, that he was to meet somebody he hadn't seen for a long time. Gerald jerked Mr. Fayce to his feet by the collar of his coat.

" Go into the kitchen and get it over, Fayce, you coward," he ordered. " The girl you are engaged to is there alone."

" Laura ! " Mr. Fayce gave one gasp, took in the situation, and went.

Gerald stood listening with lips drawn tight.

" If she's a ha'porth of pluck she'll turn him down *flat*," he breathed.

But there was not a whisper of a scene from inside the closed kitchen. After a little time, Laura came out, quite serenely, Mr. Fayce following her.

" Baste the turkey, please, Betty," she said quite calmly. And then she looked them all bravely in the

face, and said, "Mr. Fayce and I are quite old friends. Once we thought we might have been something more than friends, but happily we found out that we were mistaken before it was too late. Isn't it pleasant to meet again like this? And Mrs. Fayce would like to come and see us, Aunt Mary, so we shall have two friends instead of one."

"The beggar's *married*!" gasped Gerald in a stage whisper.

Fayce was looking very much relieved, although rather sheepish; but Laura looked radiant. She had given Gerald one glance, and it told her what she wanted to know. Robin came out to see the fun, leaning on Aunt Mary's arm. Gerald noticed that the Den was vacant, and he and Laura melted away unostentatiously in that direction.

It was a curious thing how that turkey refrained from getting burnt. The oven must have been in a truly angelic temper, for everybody was talking away as fast as their tongues could go, and when it did strike any of them to go and baste it, it struck them all within a few minutes, so that it was only just recovering from an attack from Laura accompanied by Gerald, when the Captain and Alberta set about it, after which Sally went and basted it again, because she had no one to talk to.

Kingsway drew Alberta apart. It was really too hot in the house, and they were glad to cool their faces on the verandah after the last basting operation.

"You haven't heard anything of Jake?"

"No," said Alberta.

"I want to know," went on Kingsway. "I think

you ought to tell me, Alberta. We've been such chums, and you never used to have any secrets. And it's such a short time—I didn't think it was possible that I'd lost you altogether in a few months. It serves me right, I suppose. I might have known. I oughtn't to kick, because, after all, I shouldn't be here at all if it wasn't for Crane, confound him!"

He frowned, looked sternly at his boots, and then at Alberta. "Well?" he said.

"Well what?" She met his stern eyes appealingly. "Captain! I wasn't flirting. I couldn't help it. He—he was so lonely—and—it wasn't any harm—just to be kind—I couldn't snub him. And it wasn't any harm—just to let him think—if it helped him—and made him better——"

"And you don't *love* him?" Kingsway snapped. Then his voice broke. He caught her hands.

"Oh, don't! Don't cry! I'm bullying you again. and I'm a brute. Alberta! Listen! I love you. I can't give you up to Jake. Didn't you guess it was you I came for? Didn't you know when you went away? Or did you know very well, Alberta,—and did you want to get away from a dull old fellow you'd known always, and find new friends and young folks that didn't belong to the last generation? You don't know what it was like at home without you. And now I've got fixed up with all this business over here, why, I find I need you more than ever. Were you *very* tired of being loved by a back-number, Alberta? And—I say—is it all fixed up between you and Jake?"

Alberta was very white. She laid a restraining hand on his sleeve. "There isn't—there never has been anything fixed up," she whispered. "There—there isn't

going to be. But—Captain,—you know—you never, never let me think you—cared for me—like that ! ”

“ I’ll try not to boss you *very* much,” said Kingsway, after an interval. “ Hadn’t we better baste the turkey again ? ”

“ Sally’s doing it. And, Captain dear, I think it’s rather nice being bossed, for a change.”

“ Dinner’s ready,” announced Sally for the third time, for the Chinook was blowing hard against her voice. But she could see through the Chinook, and her eyes were big with reproach.

It was a very happy Thanksgiving dinner, though Sally was pensive. Mr. Fayce talked the most, and Gerald sat by Laura looking ridiculously sublime. He had helped her with the last lap of the cooking, and they had made the most of their time.

Robin was telling his adventures, and was listened to as a hero indeed, and ate as much of everything as he was allowed, and then begged for more.

“ How the Meritorious Cat would have enjoyed turkey ! ” Sally said in sentimental vein. She seemed determined to cast a gentle gloom over the scene.

Aunt Mary was looking for another tiny bit of breast for Robin over Gerald’s shoulder when the top of a Stetson hat crossed under the window.

Sally was the first to see it. Before Alberta could wonder, “ Who can be coming now ? ” she murmured, “ Jake ! ”

“ No,” said Alberta. “ He has a snake-skin round *his* hat.”

Sally, nefarious Sally, knew better ; the snake-skin was against her throbbing, rioting heart. And it *was* Jake.

He came in, heralded by Rip, in sudden hysterics of recognition, and stood in the door looking round the family party in some bewilderment. His honest, weather-tanned face was the colour of a prairie sunset on a frosty night.

Then he made straight for Sally, fumbling with the fastenings of his sheepskin coat.

"I got him," he said. "I brought him in right along. He's never turned a hair."

And out of warm keeping inside his jacket he produced tenderly the long-lost and Meritorious Cat.

"Oh, how good of you! How glad I am!" cried Alberta. She clasped the truant, with tears in her eyes. The Meritorious One wriggled ungratefully, and scratched her a little. Sally sprang forward.

"At least the Meritorious One is mine, Alberta," she said, wild-eyed, and that discerning creature placed a white paw lovingly on her cheek, in dumb acknowledgment of ownership.

"I knew you'd be glad to have him back," Jake was saying to Sally. He did not seem to realise that there was anybody there but her. He had not even regarded the Captain's outstretched hand. "I've been thinking about you such a lot," he said unsteadily. Laura went to make another plate hot. The turkey was still worth looking at.

"No, I mustn't. Thank you very much. I've got a fellow out there. I had to bring him along. Dave Skelton. You know, Robin?" Here Jake came to realise Robin's bodily presence. "He's pretty well up against it, poor chap! And I've had to keep my eye on him most of the time since he went broke."

"Not old Skelton!" cried Robin. "I say, isn't this jolly?" And he ran out of doors without his hat, and Aunt Mary after him with a shawl to put over his head, while Laura made still another plate hot. Kingsway took advantage of a lull in all the chatter to grip Jake by the hand, and the two men looked into one another's eager, earnest faces with a sudden leaping forth of old friendship to be renewed.

They talked in low tones together, with a hand-clasp that was better than words; and Sally, with the cat pressed to her breast, watched them with a happy face.

Robin and Jake returned, with Skelton between them, very bashful and quite bowled over with Aunt Mary's warm invitation to stay.

"I hope Mrs. Skelton is well," she was saying. "I shall never, never forget her kindness to poor Robin. It was so nice to feel that he was with a good, motherly woman. What have I said wrong, Sally? Oh, I beg your pardon! I am so stupid! That was one of the things that were not true."

Looking back, everybody wondered how it was they all enjoyed that Thanksgiving dinner so heartily. With all the interruptions and surprises that punctuated it, the vegetables must have been very nearly cold by the time every one was seated at very close quarters about the table. It literally groaned, but rather with the pressure from outside than with the weight of the diminished turkey.

Kingsway was eagerly explaining the big elevator scheme to Jake, in connection with the work which he wanted him to undertake for him. He talked in a deep, low voice, and all the boys were quiet for a bit,

listening, while Sally talked to the cat in a quiet undertone that disturbed nobody. Skelton was listening too, his rough-hewn face keen with the born farmer's slow-moving intelligence, nodding gravely as several knotty points were set forth.

When Kingsway paused, he reached a great brown hand across the table and grasped his.

"I belong to the old times," said Skelton huckily, "and I'm like a lot of old-timers that have had their day and missed their way. I'm down and out, sir. Down and out—and it's not much matter, for I'm getting an old chap, and there's no one left to go down with me. But—the lads that are trying against big odds to-day—the poor beggars that are starving on homesteads—they'll bless you, sir, later on, when they've made good along of the help this scheme of yours will give 'em."

"A man's never down and out while he's above ground, if then," said Kingsway, who knew what he meant himself if nobody else did. "I'd like to have a business talk with you, Mr. Skelton, another day. We can't run this thing without some shrewd men who understand conditions here, and have lived here and tussled with it, and know it year in and year out."

"You bet, Skelton knows all about it!" cried Robin, his thin face glowing with pleasure. "I'd like to see any man that knows the country better than he does!"

Mr. Fayce inquired tenderly when shares would be obtainable, as he knew a fellow who was looking out for a good safe investment.

Alberta was heard to sigh.

"If only *I* could have done something like that,"

she said, being challenged with an inquiring glance from the Captain. "I did so want to, and there seems nothing really worth while that a girl can do in this Western country."

Kingsway got to his feet, and filled her glass and his own with the native port which Aunt Mary had allowed on the table on the assumption that it was non-alcoholic.

"I'll give you a health," he said, when the decanter had been round. "Here's Alberta."

"He doesn't mean me," explained Alberta, blushing happily.

"No, I don't mean my little Alberta," said Kingsway. "Big Alberta, this great, lonely province, with its failures and its tragedies! I'm not going to make a speech; but I'll just say this. Years ago, I put money in this country, in this town, and it made a fortune for me while I was in the army, and I never did anything for it. And then I came out here to fetch *my* Alberta, and I found the other Alberta was just crying aloud for men to put some work into her and to live for her—men with money and influence to help out the poor chaps that are putting their flesh and blood into it, and falling by the way for lack of a few measly dollars—and so—and so—I know you think it's a dreadful place, Aunt Mary, but whether you like it or not, little Alberta is going to be a part of big Alberta till we've got this thing established."

"Good for you, Captain!" said Gerald. "I've always held that a fellow who really means to make his mark in the world will make a much bigger mark if he's married."

Dave Skelton looked slowly and thoughtfully around the circle of happy faces.



" Say, folks," he said slowly—" say, folks, I guess this is some Thanksgiving ! "

Laura said, amid the clinking of glasses, that if Gerald was going to make a speech she was going to retire, and in the general laughter Sally slipped out of the room.

Mr. Fayce rose to go.

" My wife's expecting me," he said. " I'll have to be there and stuff some dinner down. It's our first Thanksgiving since we were married, you see ! "

" I'm glad he's gone," said Laura. " She's so fond of him, poor little thing. I hope she will never find out he married her for her money. What is a jack-pot, Gerald ? He told me he was in a jack-pot, and but for her thousand dollars he would have got it where the chicken got the axe. I hope she will never know he married her for her money."

" Guess I'll go and stoke up," volunteered Jake. The offer was quite superfluous, for the house was as warm as anybody could wish.

He had heard feet going down into the basement.

Alberta said, " Please do, Jake ! Thank you so much."

It was nearly dark down in the basement, but when Jake looked twice when he got down the ladder, he made out Sally, sitting cross-legged on a box, with the glow from the little vent-hole flickering on her set, resolute face. She was staring in at the peep of fire, and her hands were folded tightly over the plump black sides of the Meritorious Cat. Jake stood silent for a second, and there was not a sound but the ecstatic purring of the cat.

" There's room on the box," said Sally, moving a few

inches. She kept her eyes on the fire, but her hand moved from the cat's side and clutched his sleeve. He had declined a share of the box, but sat on his heels beside her.

"I ought to tell you—something I did!" said Sally in a hard voice. "Perhaps you'll think it is my fault that you have lost Alberta. See! Your snake-skin—that you sent to Alberta——"

"And she threw it away. Never mind. I was a fool. It don't matter. Would you have thrown it away, Sally?"

"I—didn't give it her at all. I kept it myself. There!"

Sally's fingers crept down the neck of her blouse, and brought forth the speckled, uncanny thing.

"There! It's yours really. Take it!"

It lay, strangely warm for a snake, in Jake's big palm.

"But—won't—won't you keep it, Sally, if you like it? I—I'd rather *you* had it than Alberta!"

Sally turned her intent face full on him; in the fire-glow her eyes gleamed eagerly.

"Oh, Jake, Alberta wouldn't have liked to live on a homestead. *She* didn't care. And she's got the Captain. And—oh, Jake, I know it's an awful thing to say, but I don't care, and I shall say it—I love you—there—I love you like anything, Jake!"

A man who lives much alone loses to some extent the power of ready speech; and a snake-skin *is* an awkward thing to tie in a dark place.

Aunt Mary called down the air-shaft, which carried sounds both up and down, that they must be doing a lot of stoking up.

“ Come,” said Jake, “ let’s go up and tell them.”

And yet there was very little need for words when Sally came in hanging on Jake’s arm, and laid her curly head with a little happy cry on Aunt Mary’s knee, with the spotted snake-skin tied in a clumsy bow about the creamy slimness of her bare neck.

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